

Just Survive Somehow by leighwrites

Category: IT (2017), IT - Stephen King, Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Alternate Universe - No Pennywise (IT), F/F, F/M, I've been given my list of UNTOUCHABLES from a friend, M/M, The rating is mostly for zombie deaths, Zombies though, but I can't promise anything, if you wanna suggest untouchables you can

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Dustin Henderson, Eddie Kaspbrak, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Georgie Denbrough, Henry Bowers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Hanlon, Mike Wheeler, Patrick Hockstetter, Reginald "Belch" Huggins, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris, Steve Harrington, Victor Criss, Will Byers, and like a ton of other people i can't think of right now

Relationships: Ben Hanscom/Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough/Stamley Uris, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, probably a lot of others to come

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Summary:

When the world ended, and the dead rose to eat the living, it turned into kill or be killed, but how do you survive when the creatures around you are constantly evolving?

[AU requested from my friends and you can yell at me, as always, on tumblr @aizeninlefox]

1. Chapter 1

It had been approximately one year since the world had come to an end. Richie Tozier had suddenly been thrust into a world where death could come at any second due to being torn open alive by one of the many undead creatures that were now roaming the world, and he had somehow managed to adapt and survive.

The sound of a groan ripped through the street, forcing Richie to come to a sudden stop. He was quiet for a moment, straining his ears as he gripped at the arm that was wrapped around his neck. The sound of shuffling never came, signalling that the creature he heard was trapped in a nearby building.

Perfect.

“R-Richie?”

Richie felt his grip tighten even more on the arm, his gaze shifting to his now former roommate who was leaning against him, jaw clenched in pain.

“You okay Staniel?” Richie asked, keeping his voice low so as not to alert any lingering zombies to their location as he started to walk again.

Stan stumbled with each step Richie made, hissing in pain whenever his foot made contact with the ground. “I – I can’t.”

Richie furrowed his brow. “You can’t?”

“It hurts too much Rich.” Stan said, clenching his jaw again. “You should – you should just leave me here and keep going.”

Richie frowned, moving Stan’s arm to use his hand to right the glasses on his face. “Shut the fuck up. I don’t want to hear you say that again.”

“Richie.”

“No, Stan. You listen to me. I’ve heard it all before. *Keep going Richie.*”

I'm just gonna slow you down. I'm not leaving you." Richie insisted as he led Stan towards an alleyway. "You think I could live with myself if I left anyone – let alone *you* – to be torn to shreds by those things?"

Stan heaved a sigh, leaning against Richie's side. Richie's arm tightened around his waist, and then he was leading Stan through an alleyway.

"Besides," Richie grinned, pausing at the end of the alleyway to peer around the corner. "It's just a broken ankle. It's hardly like you were bitten. I got you, okay? You just have to hold on for me, baby boy. I'm gonna get you something for the pain."

Stan groaned, biting back whatever retort he had to Richie's dumb nickname. Instead he nodded, using his free arm to adjust the duffle bag on his shoulder that Richie had jammed their essentials into.

Usually Richie was the one carrying it, but ever since Stan had been ragged from a fence they'd been climbing a couple of days ago by one of the zombies, it had fallen on Stan to carry it so Richie could support him up.

"F-fuck." Stan hissed, attempting to just drag his useless ankle behind him to keep the pressure off it. "Why does this have to fucking hurt so much?"

Richie chuckled. "Gee, I wonder if it's 'cause you broke a bone, Staniel. Want me to carry you?"

"That's gonna make this trip *longer* Richie." Stan pointed out.

Richie snorted, carefully leaning Stan against the nearby wall before he turned his back to him and crouched. "I can run if you're on my back, Stan. Can't do that if I'm dragging you."

Stan carefully pushed from the wall, stumbling in the process, and slid his arms over Richie's shoulders. He jumped awkwardly as Richie stood, and Richie's arms curled under his legs as he teetered for a moment from the sudden weight.

"Christ – forgot about the bag." Richie muttered as Stan leaned forward, reaching for the holster on Richie's side. "Hands to yourself,

Stanthony.”

“Shut the fuck up Trashmouth.” Stan hissed, grabbing the pistol and clicking the safety off. “I have to be your arms like this – and your brain.”

Richie chuckled, his body shaking with the action.

And then he was jogging.

It had been approximately one year since the world had come to an end and the first injury they’d managed to obtain was Stanley Uris breaking his ankle.

“What are we even looking for in this place?” Beverly Marsh hissed as she looked over the nearby shelf of medication, her head tilted to one side and a finger pressed thoughtfully to her chin.

Her supply gathering companion, Mike Hanlon, looked down at the list in his hand and furrowed his brow. “I can’t even say half these words. Let’s just grab everything we can fit into your backpack.”

Beverly nodded, removing the bag from her shoulder and opening it as Mike began to gather various medical supplies into his arms and drop them into the backpack. “Do you think that he’ll be mad we went off list?”

Mike snorted, an armful of bandaged and antiseptic into the bag. “Are you kidding me, Bev”? Eddie’s gonna be proud we were paranoid and just got *everything* so we’re prepared for almost any problem.”

“Yeah that’s true.” Beverly carefully placed the backpack onto the ground so she could help Mike fill it with supplies.

The sound of static emitted from the radio that was clipped to Mike’s belt, followed by a soft tapping through the speaker.

Mike frowned, leaving Beverly to gather the supplies they needed as he removed the radio from its location and raised it to his mouth, pressing his thumb firmly against a button on the side.

“Hey, what’s up, Bill?”

“We have two guys heading our way.”

Beverly froze and straightened up, stepping over to where Mike was as he responded to Bill. “Do you think they’re dangerous?”

“I dunno Mike. I think one of them is injured, but we’ve dealt with people like that before. Just... I’m coming back down from the roof okay? Keep getting the stuff we need but stay sharp. Never trust a person with a gun, right? Even an injured one...”

“Got it.” Mike returned the radio to his belt. “You heard the man, Bev.”

Beverly nodded, an unsure look on her face. “I’ll get the stuff. You keep an eye out. I trust you to have my back, Hanlon.”

“You got it.” Mike said, moving a hand behind his back to retrieve the pistol from its place tucked into the waistband of his jeans. “Don’t forget to grab some inhalers.”

Beverly nodded. “I *know* Mike. This isn’t my first supply run.”

Mike chuckled, creeping across the pharmacy towards the doorway. “Alright, alright. You don’t need to get snappy, Beverly.”

Beverly laughed, the sound echoing through the pharmacy.

Richie came to a stop on the hospital parking lot, staring up at the building that loomed over them. He could have sworn he’d just seen someone up on the roof, but part of him wondered if maybe it was wishful thinking since he hadn’t seen anyone but Stan since towards the start of outbreak.

“Something wrong Rich?” Stan asked, following Richie’s line of vision towards the roof.

Richie shook his head, moving quickly towards the hospital doors. “Nothing, Stan! I was trying to work out the time of day.”

Stan snorted, his grip tightening on the pistol. “I think it’s about

three. Should be getting dark soon.”

Richie grimaced, pausing to adjust Stan on his back before he continued to walk again. “Yeah, and we know the rules that have kept us alive, right?”

Stan nodded. “One stays awake. Don’t travel at night. Keep doors and windows barricaded.”

“Atta boy.” Richie praised.

The hospital lobby, much to their relief, was completely empty. There were a couple of disposed zombies on the ground signalling that someone had passed through the hospital at some point, and Richie could only *hope* they hadn’t cleared out the pain medication that Stan needed.

Reaching the front desk, Richie turned and carefully deposited Stan onto the smooth surface. “Wait here.”

“Not like I can go anywhere, jackass.” Stan grumbled.

Richie chuckled, moving across the slightly darkened lobby to an overturned wheelchair. He pulled it upright, grimacing at the blood stains that covered the seat before he pushed it back to the desk where he’d left Stan.

“It’s a little bloodied, but it’s the best we have.” Richie said, nodding his head at the chair as he held his arms out to Stan.

Stan looked down at his clothes which were covered in a mixture of blood, dirt, and vomit before he slid his arms over Richie’s shoulders. “I think I’ll live, Rich.”

Richie grinned, wrapping his arms around Stan to lift him from the desk, placing him carefully onto the floor where he proceeded to take the bag from Stan and help him into the wheelchair. After propping Stan’s foot carefully onto one of the footrests, Richie dropped the bag into his lap and circled around to the back of the chair, his hands curling around the handles.

“Okay, now let’s get you some pain medication and maybe some

crutches or something.” Richie said, wheeling Stan towards a set of broken down double doors that were stained in blood.

“Can’t we just keep the chair?” Stan joked as Richie weaved around a dead body. “You can just shove me away when the zombies come.”

Richie chuckled, tightening his grip on the handles. “Can’t risk you falling out the chair and breaking more bones, Staniel!”

“Keep your voice down!” Stan hissed. “We might not be alone, remember? These are *your* damn survival rules.”

Richie grimaced. “I mean... at least we’d know if we were alone or not if I was loud.”

“That’s not the point.”

Bill Denbrough breathed a sigh of relief in the stairwell he’d been hiding in upon realising they hadn’t managed to see him, peering around the door in time to see Richie and Stan turning a corner.

He knew their camp had rules about outsiders, but these two didn’t *seem* bad. They were no older than the majority of people in the camp, and one of them was *injured*.

There was no way they could survive on their own.

Bill grabbed the radio that was tucked into the front pocket of his jacket, bringing it to his mouth and pushing the button down. “Mike.”

“*Yeah Bill?*”

“I just saw the two of them again. It looks like one of them is really hurt. They’re gonna be coming your way.”

“*What do you want us to do?*”

“I don’t know. They don’t look dangerous. One of them is a damn wheelchair.”

“*Should we take them back with us? Would Eddie mind?*”

“Hey, do you forget I’m the camp leader?” Bill joked.

“Well, sometimes I wonder.” Beverly’s voice responded to him with an amused tone. *“You know, since you’re out here with us and not back at the camp.”*

“Hey, I made a promise to Ben to keep you safe, and if that means coming out here with you guys, then I will.”

“Aw, you’re so sweet, Bill! You still coming back?”

Bill adjusted his grip on the strap over his shoulder that was connected to his sniper as he stepped out of the stairwell and followed the path Richie and Stan had taken.

“Yeah, I’m lagging behind a bit though since they’re not that far ahead of me. Don’t worry. If they start something I won’t be too far behind.”

“Alright. We’ll see what they’re like in the meantime. Be safe.”

“You guys too.”

2. Chapter 2

Summary for the Chapter:

This didn't quite come out as good as I wanted it to but here we are.

“Hey Stan, what do you call a fast zombie?” Richie asked, his fingers tapping idly on the handles of the wheelchair as pushed Stan around a hospital gurney that had been turned over at some point and discarded in the middle of the hallway.

Stan groaned, tilting his head back to look up at Richie with a scowl. “I swear to fucking god Richie if you don’t stop these zombie jokes –”

“A *zombie!*”

“Ohmygod.”

Richie grinned down at him. “Why was the zombie afraid to cross the road?”

“*Richie*, come on man just stop alre –”

“He’d lost his guts!”

“Shit that was fucking bad.”

Richie laughed, loudly at that, the sound echoing around them. “What does it take to become a zombie?”

“Richie *please* –”

“*Deadication.*”

“I fucking hate you.”

Whatever Richie was about to say was cut off by a groan, forcing him to come to a halt. He was quiet for a moment, straining his ears to listen. Another groan rang out, followed by a second one, and then a third.

Richie grimaced.

He couldn't risk wheeling Stan around the corner into a group of creatures that would descend on him and tear into him like a rabid animal. "It sounds like we got some live ones, Staniel. Be a good boy and stay here while I take care of them."

"Richie, don't you dare leave me in the middle of a dark hallway in a zombie infested hospital alone!"

His plea fell on deaf ears as Richie stepped around the wheelchair and crouched to remove the knife strapped to his calf. Stan tried again to protest over Richie leaving him, but he was already at the end of the hallway and peering around the corner to see just where the zombies were.

He'd vastly underestimated how many zombies were lurking around the corner. There were seven of them spaced out throughout the hallway, some of which were wandering into nearby rooms. Richie tightened his grip on the knife and ducked around the corner quickly, heading for the zombie closest to him.

The moment that Richie had vanished around the corner and out of his sight, Stan felt the anxiety starting to build in his chest, curling his hand around the handle of the pistol in his lap.

"*Richie.*" Stan hissed, leaning forward in the chair.

A snarl and a curse sounded from around the corner, followed shortly by a loud bang.

"Richie!" He called, voice filled with panic. He felt his stomach drop as a rotted corpse stumbled around the corner, looking around for the source of the shout it had heard. "Shit. Shit. Shit."

With his brain on auto pilot, Stan scrambled to try and get out of the wheelchair, only to fall back down into it roughly the moment his foot touched the ground and sent a sharp pain through him, the chair tipping back slightly.

The pistol fell to ground with a clatter just out of his reach and Stan twisted in the chair to awkwardly lean over the arm and reach out

for it. “Fuck. Stupid fucking ankle.”

The zombie was stumbling towards him, bloodied mouth opening as a snarl ripped from its throat. Stan gave up trying to reach the gun, his arm falling against the side of the wheelchair.

What was the point in fighting it if it had already managed to get Richie? It wasn't like he could survive on his own with a broken ankle of all things.

A gunshot rang out through the hallway and startled Stan, the zombie jerking back as the bullet clipped its shoulder. It let out another snarl and picked up the pace a little, determined to reach its meal.

“Fuh-Fuck.”

Stan froze at the sound of the unfamiliar voice, his body twisting awkwardly in the chair again. From his vantage point, all he could make out was *someone* standing at the juncture where he and Richie had come from, sniper rifle raised with the scope pressed to their face.

They fired again, and this time the zombie's head shot back, body falling backwards and hitting the ground with a thud.

Bill lowered his gun, hastily shouldering it as he ran up the hallway. He stopped long enough to grab the discarded pistol and bag; throwing them onto Stan's lap and rushing behind the chair to grab the handles.

“Huh-hold on. Literally.”

Stan nodded, his hands curling around the arms of the chair as Bill broke into a run, twisting and skidding around the corner. He could see Richie just ahead of them, his arm shoved against the throat of a zombie that was leaning over him and snapping its rotted teeth at Richie's face in an attempt to bite down on him.

Bill picked up his speed, navigating the hallway with ease since Richie had been tossing the disposed zombies to the side of the hallway.

“Stick your good leg out.”

Stan did as instructed, not sure *why* until his foot crashed into the ribcage of the zombie, sending it barrelling away from Richie who heaved a sigh of relief, followed quickly by a yelp as the one of the chair’s wheels crashed into his leg.

“Sorry.” Bill shouted, releasing the chair and swinging the sniper from his shoulder.

He jumped over Richie and slammed the butt of the weapon down into the zombie’s head with a sickening *squelch* as its skull split open and spilled an array of blood and brain matter onto the ground.

“Gross.” Richie groaned, slowly sitting up and using a nearby fallen cart to help him stand.

“Bill?” Beverly came rushing from one of the rooms, backpack slung loosely over her shoulder. Taking a look around the hallway, her eyes widened and a hand shot her mouth. “Oh my god there were – we thought it was just a pack so we stayed hidden. I didn’t know there was a *person* out here.”

Mike came up behind Beverly, his expression almost mirroring her own. “Shit. I only saw the pack coming and ducked back into the room to warn Bev’.”

“It’s fine.” Bill assured them, returning the sniper to its resting place. “I had it covered.”

“Rich.” Stan said, grabbing the attention of his blood covered friend. “Don’t ever fucking leave me alone like that again.”

“Right-o Staniel.” Richie said, giving him a mock salute. “Thanks for the help uh, Bill was it?” Bill nodded and Richie grinned. “I’m Richie and the idiot in the chair with the broken ankle is Stan. I appreciate you helping him but now I need to find something for him.”

“You won’t find anything.” Beverly said, had hand grasping at the strap of her bag. “Most of this hospital was cleared before we got here. We uh, we can help you though, right Bill? We have some doctors and they have the things that can help your friend. They can

set the bone back and put a cast on it or something..."

"I don't know --"

"Richie you said you were gonna get me help and if you turn this down I will shoot you with your own gun." Stan warned, tone firm. "Or maybe I'll break one of *your* bones so you can see how much pain I'm in."

Beverly giggled, flashing a bright grin at them. "It looks like it's settled Richie. You're coming with us on the orders of Stan." She held her hand out to him, the grin never leaving her face. "I'm Beverly, and this Mike."

Mike offered them a nod of acknowledgement while Richie and Beverly shook hands, working on getting his pistol back into its rightful place in the back of his jeans.

"Alright let's get you back to our camp." Bill said, stepping around Richie and grabbing the handles of the wheelchair.

"I can handle pushing him." Richie said; almost possessive in a way.

"Richie you just had an 'almost died because I ran off on my own like an idiot' experience. Take a break." Stan said.

Richie glared at him, reaching out and grabbing the bag from Stan's lap which he pulled over his shoulder. "I'm taking this at least."

Mike removed the radio from his belt, bringing it to his mouth as he walked ahead of the group; nudging things out of the way with his foot so Bill could push Stan through the hallway without having to stop.

"Hey, Mike here. We're about to head back. We got some strays with us."

"Status?"

"Two of them, male, and one of them has a broken ankle."

There was a sigh on the radio as Mike shouldered open a set of glass

doors to the hospital parking lot.

“Alright. I’m already heading back so I’ll tell him to get everything set up. I have to go now I think I’m almost out of ran –”

“Is it just me or does he sound annoyed?” Beverly asked, holding the door open so Bill could wheel Stan into the lot.

The lot was empty aside from a few overturned cars and a dirty grey truck parked in the middle that Mike was already opening up the bed of.

“You know he hates it when you come on a supply run.” Bill said.

“I know. I’ll stay back from the next one.” Beverly said. “You can bring Eddie with you or something. You know he’s itching to get out of camp. He hates staying behind.”

Bill snorted, stopping the wheelchair at the back of the truck, Stan’s back facing the vehicle. “That’s because he’s a pent up chaotic bundle of rage who can finally let it out without consequences.”

Beverly grinned, removing the backpack from her shoulder and tossing it into the truck bed next to another one. “Got that right.”

Bill jumped up onto the bed, moving various things aside. “Where’s that blanket you used last night?”

Beverly opened the door of the truck and reached in, grabbing a fluffy red blanket before passing it over to Bill who laid it out carefully on the bed of the truck before he crawled back across to the end.

“Gonna need your help Richie.” Bill said, motioning to Stan. “I can get the arms but you need to get the legs and kick the chair away.”

“Oh come *on*.” Mike said, approaching the wheelchair and grabbing Stan’s arms before he hoisted the boy over his shoulder. “Get up there, Rich.”

Richie jumped into the bed of the truck and crawled passed Bill as Mike carefully leaned over and placed Stan onto the blanket.

“Because *that* wasn’t awkward or made me feel like I was five.” Stan groaned as Richie hooked his arms under Stan and pulled him back, settling down and placing his friend’s head into his lap.

“Sorry. Quickest way.” Mike apologized, closing up the bed of the truck as Bill sat against the side, grabbing Stan’s leg carefully and propping it up on his lap.

“Next stop, home!” Beverly cheered, her voice echoing around the lot as she climbed into the truck. “Keep your arms, legs, and supplies inside the ride at all times! Also take a nap if you’re tired cause it’s gonna be a *long* drive.”

As Mike started the truck and pulled away from the lot, Richie leaned back against the glass that separated them from Beverly and Mike, closing his eyes.

“Rich?”

“Yeah Staniel?”

“I was worried when I heard the crash and the zombie stumbled around the corner.”

Richie snorted, a grin coming to his face. “It’s gonna take more than that to kill me. Hey, can I ask you something Stan?”

“What is it, Rich?”

“What’s a zombie’s favourite football team?”

“Don’t you fucking da –”

“The Washington Deadskins.”

“I’m gonna throw you out of this fucking truck I swear.”

There was a laugh from Bill, the movement of his body bouncing Stan’s leg. “That’s the dumbest fucking joke I ever heard.”

Stan wasn’t sure just when he fell asleep, but the next time he was aware of anything, it was dark with only the bright pale moon above

them for lighting. Judging by the lack of anything passing by them, Stan was able to deduce that they were on the highway somewhere.

Richie had left him at some point, and it was suddenly Bill's lap he was using as a pillow. Bill was sitting with one arm propped against the side of the truck and his sniper resting in the bend of his elbow, head angled to look at whatever scenery they were passing.

Someone nuzzled their face against his stomach and Stan felt his body tense, attracting Bill's attention.

"It's just Beverly." Bill assured him, his fingers drumming idly against the side of the truck as it swerved a little sharply. "She was getting tired so we stopped so she could switch places with Richie. He's driving now while Mike sleeps... in a sense."

"Yeah it felt like Riche Tozier's terrible driving." Stan grumbled.

"I can hear you Staniel!" Richie snapped from inside the truck. "The window's open you jerk."

Stan snorted, ignoring Richie. "So how did you move me without me waking up exactly?"

Bill stared down at him, brow furrowed. "You *did* wake up. You were kind of... annoyed actually. You tried to kick Richie for moving you until you realised your foot wasn't going to allow that and gave up."

Stan scowled. "I don't remember that."

"You must have been tired. Take this exit, Richie."

"Maybe. It's not like we ever sleep much. Too busy on the move. Only rested when our bodies demanded it."

Bill frowned at that. How had they been managing to run on barely any sleep for around a whole year? Beverly shifted in her sleep, tugging Richie's jacket around herself to warm up as her face nuzzled into Stan's stomach again.

"Left here." Bill said, shifting slightly under Stan as he turned to talk to Richie. "Just follow the dirt path. You're looking for a sign that

says Hanlon farm.”

Richie nodded with a chuckle. “If I get shot for showing up with Mike unconscious I’m gonna haunt you.”

Bill snorted. “You won’t. Mike radio’d ahead, remember? Ben would have already told Eddie by now to expect strangers with us.”

“And Eddie is...?”

“Trust me. You’ll know when you see him.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Hope you're all ready to meet an apocalypse Eddie next!

3. Chapter 3

Summary for the Chapter:

Me making direct shout outs to the Infected from L4D and zombies from other games/shows?

More likely than you think since this was never intended to be 'normal' zombies!

Bill had instructed Richie to park in a line of vehicles that was already neatly lined up; spaced out evenly with about five feet between them and facing towards the gate of the farm. Bill had explained, upon Richie asking, that this was a precaution so that everyone could get away quickly if the need ever arose.

Beverly was helping Mike to unload the supplies they'd found while Richie and Bill moved Stan to sit at the end of the truck bed when a muscular young man approached them, throwing his arms around Beverly who had looked up at Mike's nudge to her side.

"I missed you." The man, identified as Ben by Mike, clutched Beverly to his chest and buried her nose into his hair.

"I missed you too." Beverly said, pulling back to plant a kiss on his mouth. "I promise, I'll stay behind the next couple of times so you don't worry so much."

"You could just come on *my* runs instead." Ben said, releasing her to grab one of the heavy crates from the ground.

Beverly beamed. "I'd love that."

"Alright, let's get you up to the house for some help." Bill said, pulling Stan's arm around his neck and wrapping an arm around his waist; helping him to stand carefully.

Richie shouldered his backpack and approached Stan's other side, grabbing his other arm so Stan could hop between them rather than limping and bumping his foot against the ground.

As they made for the house in the middle of the farm grounds, Richie noticed that there were tents set up on the grounds in front of the house, illuminated by the camp fires and the light coming from the house. Some of them were clustered together in a way that made him wonder if they belonged to families or groups of friends who had somehow made their way here.

The camp wasn't *big* by any means, but there were still a lot more people than Richie had imagined he would see since the world had come to an end. He tightened his hand around Stan's arm at the sound of a hiss; patting his arm with his fingers.

"You're doing good Staniel." Richie soothed. "Almost there and then you can collapse and go back to sleep."

Bill chuckled, pausing briefly to adjust Stan's arm around his shoulders. "Mike's parents will fix you up in no time."

"Bill!" A voice shouted somewhere in the dark.

Bill froze, coming to a stop that jerked Stan and Richie into halting with him. "Oh no –"

"Brace yourself Bill." Mike said, adjusting the crate in his arms.

There was a teenager sprinting towards them through the grounds, fourteen or fifteen if Richie had to take a guess, and Bill released Stan's arm to hold his hand up in an attempt to stop them.

"Georgie, no! I'm trying to –"

Bill pushed Stan away gently moments before he was tackled to the ground. Stan jumped the extra distance to the side to clutch at Richie's shirt so he didn't end up part of the pile-up, twisting the fabric in his grip. The teenager was now lying over Bill, trapping him completely under him and hugging him in what Stan could only describe as a very *painful* manner while Bill attempted to push him off.

"Georgie – come on – you're not six anymore –"

"I don't care!" Georgie snapped, clutching Bill tighter. "You guys

were gone for two days! *Two days*, Bill! Mom's been so worried! She said camp leader or not you're still her little boy and she *worries* when you go out there!"

Bill's tough exterior vanished as he softened, wrapping his arms around his younger brother for a moment in a hug. When Georgie finally released Bill from his entrapment he helped him to stand; Bill returning to Stan's side to pull his arm back around his neck.

"So are these the strays?" Georgie asked, walking on Bill's right with a slight jump in his step. He was always happiest whenever Bill returned to the camp.

"Why are you eavesdropping on Ben and Eddie?" Bill asked, shoving Georgie.

Georgie stumbled, regaining his balance again quite easily with a huff. "*Because* I'm old enough to help the camp now. You said so yourself, Bill! I went in to ask if they'd heard anything and Eddie said you were heading back with strays."

Beverly giggled. "They'll be domesticated in no time, Georgie! One of the family."

Georgie grinned. "Yeah? It's been a while since you brought anyone back. I was starting to think we were it."

"Might be all there is now." Beverly said, looking around the camp. "They're the first people we've seen since we came back with that Betty girl."

"*Where the hell were you guys?*" A voice snapped, and Richie tensed at the form of an oncoming person.

A person who looked both worried *and* angry.

Richie knew without a doubt that this had to be Eddie.

"Uh-oh." Georgie said, trying his best to hide a laugh. "You guys are in troubleeee."

Bill shoved Georgie again. "Get out of here, brat. Tell mom we're

back.”

Georgie gave him a mock salute and took off towards the house, rushing by the stranger in the process.

“Dial it back Eddie.” Mike said, shifting the crate again as he tried to distribute the weight better in his arms. “We would have been back sooner if we didn’t have to push out to Derry for some supplies.”

Eddie exhaled sharply through his nose. “I was fucking worried about you.”

Bill smiled fondly, raising his free hand to ruffle Eddie’s hair. “I know, Eddie. I’m sorry. Next time we won’t push out so far without a heads up. We just... we know how important it was to make sure we were stocked up with medical supplies.”

Richie took a moment to appreciate the way Eddie looked absolutely *immaculate* for someone who was living in a world full of zombies, and now that he paid better attention to the group standing around him, he noticed that Beverly, Mike, and Bill were also pretty clean and neat despite the current state of the world. The most dirt Bill had on him was a few specs of blood from when he’d helped Richie.

“Eddie, these are Richie and Stan; the ones we told Ben about.” Bill said, pointing to each one as he said their name. “Now, you can yell at me later for making you worry, but we need to get Stan some help.”

Eddie studied Stan and Richie for a moment, his attention lingering on Richie longer than necessary before he cleared his throat. “Broken ankle, right? Mike’s parents have the living room set up for him so they can try and fix it.”

It was weird to wake up feeling *safe* for once.

Richie had opted for sleeping in the living room with Stan despite the fact that Bill had insisted he could take a room upstairs while either himself, Mike, or Eddie were on watch. He hated the idea of leaving Stan to wake up in some strange place alone. He knew that Stan would freak out if he woke up in some strange place alone.

He needed to be there for him.

Richie stared at the patch of sun on the ceiling that was filtering into the living room through the slats of the blinds, exhaling a sigh of relief. They were safe.

And more importantly, Stan was going to be okay.

Hearing someone moving around in the hallway, Richie sluggishly climbed to his feet as the haze of sleep slowly lifted from his mind.

Stan was still sleeping soundly, the first real sleep that he'd managed to get over the course of the last year, his foot propped awkwardly on the arm of the sofa. Mike's parents had managed to splint and bandage his ankle, fitting a foot brace over it to help him walk without causing too much pain; all the while muttering how lucky Stan was that Richie had at least *tried* to splint it in some way to keep his bones straight.

Richie stretched, wincing at the low crack that sounded as his body protested to the movement, stumbling his way across the living room towards the open door. Bill was pacing the hallway, boots thumping against the wood with his assault rifle balanced lazily against his shoulder.

He stopped and turned to head back down the hallway, catching sight of Richie in the doorway. "I thought you'd be asleep longer."

"I run on three hours of sleep and stubbornness." Richie said, propping himself against the doorframe with a yawn.

Bill snorted, adjusting the rifle on his shoulder. "Sounds about right. I'm pretty sure Eddie runs on ten minutes of sleep and chaotic energy most days. How's your friend?"

"Still sleeping. I'm just going to assume that's because of the amount of pain relief they pumped into his body last night. Which, thanks for this, by the way. You didn't have to help us."

"Rich –"

"No. Listen. We were just two random people to you and your

friends. You didn't need to bring us back here and Mike's parents didn't need to help us."

Bill smiled, almost fondly. "I saw you in the hospital and followed you for a while, you know. You were cracking jokes and annoying Stan. I figured that you couldn't be bad people with the effort you went through to help him. Everyone in this camp? They're the few good ones that we managed to find since the world went to shit."

"How did this happen anyway?" Richie asked, motioning to the front door.

"I met Eddie and Beverly on the highway. The cities were being evacuated and 'cleansed', and while everyone else was panicking, Beverly took charge. She was rounding up some people up and getting a map out of Eddie's car to find somewhere... *anywhere* we could go. We found here. Took us four days to get here. We lost a lot of people. The infection was still fresh. Those things out there were faster back then."

Richie grimaced. "Some of them still are, Bill. Some of them are intelligent too. Freakishly so."

"What?"

"When we were out there... we noticed it. Stan keeps a record of some of them. So we can learn and adapt to surviving. There's this one zombie... freakish thing I ever I saw. It just sits there on the floor... and it cries. It's the most heart wrenching sound I ever heard. My mom... she thought it was a person, you know? She was just sitting there, head in her hands and sobbing. She just wanted to help this girl. She put her gun away and she approached -"

"Richie, you don't have to -"

"No, I do. You *need* to know. Some of them are *evolving* and adapting better ways to get their meal, Bill! It's like a fucking lab experiment went wrong! She just wanted to help this girl and... when she was close enough... this *thing* turned around and started snarling. That was the moment I knew... I knew it was *dangerous*. I knew what it was. An intelligent zombie. It tore her up like her flesh was just

wrapping paper on a box! That's what's out there now. Normal zombies like you see in movies? Those are nothing. The things out there... they're worse. Way worse."

Bill opened his mouth to speak, cut off by the sound of feet thumping on the staircase to his left. Angling his head, he could see Eddie descending the steps clumsily in the middle of tugging a shirt on; reaching out and snagging him by the back of his jeans before he could find a way to fall down them.

"What else have you seen?" Eddie asked, his head popping out of the t-shirt.

"Runners." Richie said, his face contorting into another grimace. "That's what got Stan. At the start, the most you got was a jog out of a zombie but... this fucker was *sprinting* like a damn track star. And the kid zombies? They're the worst ones I come across. You can shoot a runner or the crier, but the kid ones? It's like they know what you're trying to do. They can *dodge* it."

Bill and Eddie exchanged a glance.

"How the fuck are you still alive?" Eddie blurted, Bill hissing at him to shut up.

"No, no, I get." Richie said with a chuckle. "I *shouldn't* be alive after encountering those kinds of zombies. Stan shouldn't be either. But that's the thing. It was never *just* me. Stan was there too. Two of you teamed up? You can take out a crier, a runner, or a feral. I'd be dead without Stan. If there's one thing I learned in the last year... it's never go anywhere alone. Always have back up because you don't know what's out there, but I have a good idea on what is."

Bill swallowed thickly. It was bad enough when he thought the zombies were just like the ones in the movies. They were slow and easy to take out.

But the ones Richie described?

They were the reality. And the reality of the outbreak was horrifying.

4. Chapter 4

Notes for the Chapter:

Me still not introducing the Stranger Things Kids?
More likely than you think! Especially since these
guys are still in Maine right now.

Soon though!

THEN:

Eddie sighed, tapping his blood stained hands against his steering wheel as he craned his head in an attempt to see if any of the traffic in front of them was moving.

*Beverly sat in his passenger seat, idly flicking through the radio stations to try and pick up something that **wasn't** static. The last real broadcast they'd heard had mentioned evacuation centres in cities, and they'd fled their hometown to head for Portland.*

The blood stains on Beverly's face were illuminated in the morning sun, her face contorted into concentration as she listened for something – anything – that would break through the static.

Eddie thought it was pointless to try, but Beverly needed something to take her mind off what she had done; off the fact she had slaughtered her own father with a broken piece of chair.

It wasn't like Eddie hadn't done anything either. He too had killed his only living parent that same day, leaving the once zombieified form of his mother dead on their kitchen floor; bloodied frying pan discarded on the floor beside her.

He'd grabbed the keys to his mom's car and the only gun in the house before he hunted for Beverly, finding her huddled in her living room and sobbing.

“Do not engage – stay inside –”

“Do you hear that?” Beverly asked, turning the volume up on the radio.

“Report the sick – barricade your homes – wait for help.”

“Wait my ass.” Eddie said, glancing out of his window.

“If you’re – the following cities – head – evacuation centres – otherwise – home – help. CDC – Atlanta – working – cure – end – apocalypse. I repeat –”

*“Atlanta?” Beverly repeated. “Did they just say the CDC is working on a cure in **Atlanta**?”*

“It sounds like it.” Eddie tightened his grip on the wheel as the traffic started to move. “Maybe that’s where they’re evacuating people to.”

“The CDC wouldn’t be very big... not enough to house the amount of people who haven’t died...”

“Maybe the city is safe. Maybe they... maybe they found a way to quarantine it and keep whatever is going on out of there.”

“I hope so...”

NOW:

Stan tightened his arm around Bill’s neck as he limped down the porch steps of the farm house, his other hand carefully on the rail for support. The foot brace made a dull *thud* whenever it hit one of the steps, and though he knew it would have been easier to just let Bill completely support him and just *hop* down the steps, he was also determined to try and at least *walk* on his own now that he had the brace to support him better.

“Okay, you’re halfway there Stan.” Bill said, an encouraging smile on his face. “You barely even need my help with this, see?” Stan suddenly grasped at the shoulder of Bill’s shirt with a hiss. “Do you need to stop for a moment?”

Stan shook his head. “No, no. I need to do this. I need to learn to walk on my own so people don’t have to keep dragging me all over the place. I just need to be able to do the basics. Mike said this was good physical therapy.”

“Alright. So how long ago did you break your ankle?”

“About three maybe four weeks ago.” Stan said unsurely, carefully limping down to the next step. “Your days start to blend into one after a while when you’re on the road and don’t have a means to keep track of them.”

“Should be another three or four weeks then before you’re back to normal.”

“I hope so. Tired of being crippled now.”

“Hey look at you up and moving!” Richie greeted as he joined them with Mike and Eddie. “I’m mighty proud of ya Staniel. You’re a big boy now.”

“Shut up Richie.” Stan hissed, limping down the final step.

“Shesh, someone’s touchy this morning.”

Stan wobbled for a moment on the spot, Bill placing his hands to Stan’s back and chest to keep him upright. “There you go. You did it.”

Stan flashed a quick smile to Bill before his attention settled back on Richie as he removed his arm from around Bill to stand on his own. “You’re looking nice and clean for once.”

Richie grinned. “Yeah, you should try it sometime Staniel.”

“And how do you propose that I get *to* the shower and have one without falling over and breaking another bone?”

Richie looked thoughtful for a moment. “Yeah, you have a point there. I mean... just say the word and I’ll carry you up the stairs and hold you up in the shower!”

“Come near me with that intention and I will murder you.”

Richie snorted. “It’s not the first time I had to help you Stan. Remember that nice flu you had lasy year in the winter? I had to strip you down myself and clean you up because you were so damn

feverish and still demanded to be clean.”

“That was different, idiot.”

“I don’t see h –”

“There’s an actual bath up there.” Eddie said, cutting into their conversation before Stan could try and murder Richie. “One of us can get you up there and you can do the rest yourself.”

Stan narrowed his eyes at Richie. “You’re an asshole Rich.”

Richie grinned. “I know. Go get clean Stan! *I’m* apparently off on a little mission for the day.”

“You are?”

“Yup! Eddie here wants me to help them on a supply run since I know the different zombies, what they can do, and how to handle them.”

Stan frowned. “Be careful out there.”

Richie gave him a mock salute. “Will do, General Uris. I promise to come back alive but I can’t promise I’ll be clean when I’m done.”

“At this point I don’t even think you know what clean is.”

“Okay get your stuff.” Eddie said, shoving Richie forward. “We’re leaving in fifteen minutes. I’m taking Beverly and Ben with me too. We’re only going to Sanford, but if we can’t find anything, you might want to think about moving the camp. We might need to push out of Maine altogether. We can’t keep having supply teams going out there for two days not knowing if they’re gonna come back.”

“I know. Be careful while you’re there, Eddie. I don’t like the sound of the zombies that Richie mentioned this morning.” Bill said, carefully pulling Stan’s arm back around his neck. “As for you, let’s get you back inside so you can clean up now you can move around a little.”

“Make sure you’re careful with him, Billiam!” Richie said, jogging up

the steps in front of them. "You know Staniel's a delicate little flower!"

"If you guys leave him out there or lose him somehow, I won't be mad." Stan shot over his shoulder at Eddie. "I'd hug you, actually."

Eddie chuckled, tucking his hands into his pocket as he squeezed by Stan and Bill to jog up the steps after Richie. "I'll keep that in mind if he gets too annoying."

"Serious note." Stan called, and Eddie paused at the top of the steps to turn to face him. "I've been surviving out there with Richie for about a year. He can be annoying, and he can't stay still to save his life sometimes... but... the world ended a year ago and I'm still here. I'm still alive. He knows what he's doing out there. There's no one I would trust with my life more than him. He's not someone who just got lucky. He's a real survivor."

Eddie nodded, turned, and headed into the house. Bill's arm curled around Stan's waist, the two of them starting the ascent back up the steps with Mike not too far behind them.

Beverly idly tapped her fingers against the truck's steering wheel, humming to the song playing from the CD player. Ben tossed some empty crates and backpacks into the back, spreading them out carefully in along the truck bed as Eddie and Richie finally joined them, the former with a gun bag hanging from his shoulder.

"You can sit up front with Bev, Ben." Eddie said, grabbing the side of the truck and using one of the back wheels to hoist himself up into the bed. "I'm gonna make sure the guns are fully loaded and I know you hate that tedious job."

Richie hoisted himself up, dropping into the truck bed with a clang and a groan. "You made that look way easier than it was."

With a laugh, Eddie settled his back against the side of the truck and unzipped the gun bag. "Did you remember to stick your foot onto a wheel first?"

Sitting up, Richie rubbed at his ribcage with a sigh. "No. No I did

not.”

Eddie snorted, holding out a shotgun towards him as the truck jerked to life. “Know how to use it?”

“Not my first gun.” Richie said, reaching out for the shotgun. “I’m better with a rifle though.”

Eddie hummed, retracting the shotgun and setting it to one side before moving some guns around in the bag and carefully extracting a hunting rifle. “Here. I’d rather have you use something you’re actually familiar with. I don’t have time to teach you to use a shotgun without getting your ass kicked by the recoil.”

Richie chuckled, taking the hunting rifle from him and clicking something on the side. “Fair.”

“Hand me your pistol. I think we have ammo for it in here.”

Richie reached for his side, removing his pistol and holding it out to Eddie. “Better give that back to me though.”

“Trust me, I’m better with this.” Eddie pulled a rifle from the bag and waved it slightly.

“*Christ*, Eds, is that a fucking Colt Revolving Rifle? The hell did you get something like *that*?”

“Family heirloom.” Eddie said, setting the rifle to one side and reaching out for Richie’s pistol, ejecting the magazine as he looked the gun over. “Beretta, nice. You steal it from a cop?”

Richie leaned back against the side of the truck, tucking his hands behind his head. “Figured he didn’t need it anymore since he was trying to bite my face off.”

Eddie nodded thoughtfully, sifting around in the gun bag for a spare magazine, slamming it into pistol. “There, you have a fresh clip. Try not to waste it. Ammo is sparse enough these days.”

“You don’t have to tell me that.” Richie said, taking the pistol back from Eddie and returning it to its place. “I think Staniel was just a

little distraught when we had to toss out his sniper, but there was no point in carrying a useless gun. It just adds weight we don't need."

"Is that why you wear the scope around your neck? For the sniper's honour?" Eddie joked, moving the shotgun into his lap while he hunted out some shells.

Richie arched a brow, an amused smile on his face. "It's better than carrying around a clunky ass pair of binoculars, I can assure you."

"Does... does that even work? Like can you actually use that properly? Don't your glasses like... get in the way?"

"Stan was the resident Zombie Watcher and area surveyor. I was just the mule who had to carry everything."

5. Chapter 5

Notes for the Chapter:

Double update time because I had nothing to do today and sped through two chapters!

The Nouvelle evacuation centre was in a panic. All around the old school grounds people were falling victim to the reanimated corpses of what had once been their fellow survivors. Stan ducked behind an empty car, taking a moment to breathe.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

“Stan!”

Scrambling to his knees, Stan looked over the hood of the car to see a bloodied Richie running towards his hiding place. Richie stopped suddenly, turned, and slammed his knife down into the head of a zombie that had stumbled out of the nearby door before running again.

Jumping the hood, Richie slid across the smooth surface, almost crashing into Stan who moved at the last second.

“Hey, hey, look at me.” Richie said, placing a bloodied hand to Stan’s cheek. “There you go. You’re okay now. You get bitten?”

Stan took in a deep breath, finally finding his voice. “No. I got away from the auditorium before there were too many.”

“Good.” Richie breathed, relief sounding in his voice. “Good. Okay. We have to get out of here now. There’s too many of them inside the fences.” Dropping his hand from Stan’s face, Richie laced their fingers together and gave his hand a comforting squeeze. “Alright, up you get, come on Staniel. Time to go.”

Stan nodded and Richie stood, pulling him to his feet. The sound of a scream reached them as another person went down to the horde of undead, Stan flinching.

“Atta boy. Come on.” Richie said. “Cover your ears. Don’t listen. I’ll lead

you. Keep your eyes on me.”

Stan did as instructed, clamping his hands over his ears to block out the screams around him. They took off across the parking lot, weaving in and out of people who were being devoured around them. A zombie stumbled out from behind one of the supply shacks and Richie turned sharply, slamming his arm into its throat to keep it back while driving the knife down into its head.

They had to get out.

They had to survive.

An SUV came to a screeching halt beside them, and when the window rolled down, the worried face of Maggie Tozier greeted them. “Get in! Now!”

Richie didn’t need to be told twice.

Yanking the back door open, he carefully shoved Stan into the SUV and climbed in after him, slamming the door behind. As Maggie pushed her foot down onto the accelerator and sped along the parking lot towards a broken down piece of fence, Richie reached out for Stan and yanked him across the seats, shoving his head against his chest and pushing his hands tightly over Stan’s as the sounds of snarls and screams rang out around them.

“Stan!”

Stan jerked awake, confusion setting in. He didn’t recognize the room around him, and it took him a few seconds to realize that Bill was standing over him, sniper hanging from his shoulder as always with one arm stretched towards him; his hand pressed to Stan’s shoulder.

“It was just a dream.” Bill said.

“Where –”

“You don’t remember?” Bill asked, brow furrowing in concern. “I brought you up here so you didn’t have to keep sleeping on the sofa. You actually put up a bit of a fight about it until you realised the bed was big enough to fit three people.”

“Yeah, I remember now.” Stan said, more to himself than Bill.

“You forget a lot of things.”

Stan sighed, slowly adjusting himself into a sitting position. “I blocked so much stuff out at the start of this. It’s like my brain doesn’t know what it’s supposed to be blocking out anymore.”

“That’s normal. We all have things we want to block out.” Bill said, removing the sniper from his shoulder and setting it against the nightstand. “It’s even worse for you... and Richie... you were out there a long time on your own. You’ve seen worse things than half of this camp put together; things we didn’t even know were out there.”

Stan’s fingers curled into the blanket, his breath hitching in his throat.

A five year old girl twitched and jerked on the floor, her body starting to convulse as blood bubbled from her mouth. Her head dropped to the side, dead white eyes staring at Stan before her body jerked to life, a snarl ripping from her throat.

“Stan?”

The zombieified child lunged at one of the soldiers, toppling him over with ease as her fingers dug into his shoulders and her teeth sank into his throat. A gunshot rang out and the feral zombie hissed, jumping back from the shot before changing her target to the new threat.

The soldier jerked on the ground, coughing up blood before his body went still.

And then he was up running for another soldier.

“Stan!” Bill grabbed at the front of Stan’s shirt as he sat at the edge of the bed, worry etched onto his face as he tried to keep him grounded. “Come on Stan. Breathe with me. One. Two. Three.”

Stan attempted to follow the pattern of Bill’s breathing, slowly becoming aware that his own was short and panicked. “Shit.”

“It’s okay. Come on. Breathe. Where’d you go?”

"I just – *fuck*. I think I figured something out." Stan said, taking in a quick strained breath. "About the zombie evolution."

"You remembered something?"

"Yeah." Stan took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. "There was a kid in the Nouvelle Evacuation Centre who turned into a zombie. She was faster than the others, and feral as hell. She bit one of the soldiers. She probably would have just devoured him if someone hadn't shot at her. The soldier she bit... he turned and... he could *run*, Bill. He was a fresh zombie and he could run. The ferals... there's something in kids that makes a feral zombie when they turn and that same thing is put into anyone they bite. They make runners."

Bill slowly released the front of Stan's shirt. "So... new zombies are made depending on what bites them?"

Stan nodded. "I think so. That's what it looked like, anyway. That was the first time I saw a feral and a runner. Maybe... it depends on the brain when you turn."

Bill nodded, reaching out and patting Stan's shoulder comfortingly. "Get some more rest okay? I'll be just outside on watch if you need anything."

Bill snagged the strap of his sniper and raised it over his shoulder again before leaving the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Mike, who had been pacing the upper hallway, came to a stop outside of the bathroom. "He okay?"

"He's fine now." Bill made for the stairs, pausing for a moment at the top to look back at Mike. "Any word from them?"

Mike grimaced, shaking his head. "No. I'm worried, Bill. Sanford is two hours away if that. They should have been back before it got dark. Georgie's been trying to get them on the radio but they're still out of range."

Bill nodded, an unreadable expression on his face. "Don't let Stan know this isn't normal. If he thinks something happened to Richie out

there... I don't know how badly it'll affect him. He already had one panic attack tonight. I don't think he can handle another one."

"Right. And if they're not back by tomorrow?"

"Then we're gonna go looking for them ourselves."

"And if the worst has happened? Are you gonna keep *that* from Stan?"

Bill shook his head. "No. But until we know, there's no point worrying him about this. For all we know, they just lost track of time and decided to hold up somewhere and get some rest."

A five year old girl launched herself across the dark apartment hallway at Richie, wrapping her arms around his waist. Richie stumbled from her sudden appearance on him, his hands pressing to her shoulders to try and detach her; keeping the tip of his bloodied knife angled away from her.

"Stan, help. What do I do?" Richie asked, shoving at the child who didn't seem willing to let him go any time soon.

"Why are you asking me?" Stan retorted, carefully sheathing his machete into his belt. "I don't exactly have experiences with kids either, Rich."

"Lucy?" A voice called from the bedroom the child had come from, moments before a woman appeared in the doorway. "Lucy!"

The child finally released Richie, turning her back on the two boys. "It's okay mom. They're safe."

Stan clamped the pillow over his head tightly, trying to block out the memories of the earlier days of the infection that were suddenly coming back to him piece by piece.

"Weapons on the ground and step back, now!" A soldier ordered.

Richie released Lucy's hand, moving it slowly to his leg to remove the knife as he stepped forward, tossing it to the ground with a clang before stepping back. Stan slowly crouched, placing his machete down in front of him before taking a step back, standing directly next to Lucy. Lucy's mother removed the pistol from her side and ejected the magazine onto the

ground before placing her gun beside it.

The soldier lowered his gun, taking a step forward and circling behind them. He gave them a quick pat down as if searching for something, lifting shirts or ragging them to one side.

“Clear! No signs of bites! Let’s get them inside!” The soldier shouted while another one started to slide open the makeshift gate. “Grab your weapons and head in the gate. Welcome to the Nouvelle Evacuation Centre. Let’s get you cleaned up.”

The moment they were inside the gates, a rattling sounded as they were closed again before a female soldier pointed to a booth to one side.

“Weapons go over there. You don’t need them anymore. Then you go over to that man over there and give him your names so we can try and reunite you with your families.”

Richie handed his knife over to the woman at the booth before heading over to a man with a clipboard. “Tozier.”

The man hummed, flicking through the pages of names, some of which were crossed off with a large ‘E’ next to them. “Ah, there we go. Hold on a second.” He reached for his radio, lifting it to his mouth. “Hey, tell Doctor Tozier we got his son.”

“You found his son?”

“No. He found us. I’ll send him through.”

Richie jerked awake, a deafening silence surrounding him.

6. Chapter 6

Notes for the Chapter:

And here's why the supply team aren't back yet!

“Shit, shit, keep running!” Richie shouted, pushing Eddie gently towards the nearby escalator.

Behind them, the snarls ripped through the dark mall, but it didn't sway them. Eddie ran as carefully as he could down the escalator, Richie close behind him. A zombie at the foot of the escalator snarled and reached out for Eddie who slammed the butt of his rifle into its face. It forced the zombie backward, his body toppling over a bench with a disgruntled snarl, the two men continuing their run.

“I can't see them!” Eddie said, frantically searching over Richie's shoulder for signs of Beverly or Ben. “Richie where are they? I don't see them!”

“I don't know!” Richie grabbed Eddie's wrist and yanked him to the side as a small pack of zombies stumbled out of a nearby store. “I couldn't see them through the horde of zombies. Duck!”

Eddie ducked as Richie did, the latter yanking him under a metal shutter to one of the stores. Shoving Eddie through the broken door, Richie turned sharply and grabbed the shutter to pull it down, a clang sounding as one of the pursuing running zombies slammed into it.

Richie took a step back, breathing heavily as the zombie slammed itself against the shutter again in an attempt to break through the metal shield, followed shortly after by a small cluster of zombies, the clangs ringing out through the store.

“Shit that was too close.” Turning, Richie raised his flashlight to look at the store they'd taken refuge in. “Well shit... at least we found the gun store.”

Eddie took in a few heaving breaths to calm himself. “Y-yeah. Looks

like it's been raided though."

"There's bound to be something still here." Richie said, stepping across the store, feet crunching against the broken glass that had once made up the doors and windows.

Behind them, then a loud clang echoed again as one of the zombies slammed its hands against the metal, attempting to dig its nails into the surface.

Eddie cringed at the noise. "They're not gonna go away any time soon."

"No, they're not." Richie agreed, looking back over his shoulder at the shutters.

"Eddie! It's Bev! Don't worry about us. We barricaded ourselves into the outdoors store on the second floor. When the herd thins out, we'll come looking for you."

Eddie breathed a sigh of relief, grabbing the radio from his belt and lifting it to his mouth. "We're okay too. We're barricaded in the gun store. There are a few runners outside and I don't think they're going anywhere for a while. If we get out before you do, we'll come for you. Get some rest for now. It's gonna be a long night."

"Got it. We'll see what it's like in the morning and let you know."

Eddie clipped the radio back onto his belt, leaning against the counter with a groan. "This was not supposed to happen."

"Sometimes it does." Richie said, tossing his bag onto the counter and hoisting himself onto it, kicking the cash register off so he could lie down. "Get some rest Eds, I can keep watch for a while."

"I'm fine." Eddie said, keeping his attention on the shutters. "You get some rest first. You need it more. I'll keep watch."

"Fine, fine." Richie grumbled, removing his glasses and holding them out to Eddie. "Keep these on you? I'll probably roll over and break them or something."

“Sure.” Eddie took the glasses, tucking them into his pocket. “Now get some sleep. I’ll wake you up when I get tired.”

When Richie jerked awake, there was a deafening silence over the store, a blurry shape standing near the shutters.

“Eds?”

“It’s quiet.” Eddie said, keeping his voice low as he walked back across the store towards Richie, removing the glasses from his pocket and placing them into Richie’s hand. “Has been for about an hour I think.”

Richie shoved his glasses on and slowly sat up on the counter, swinging his legs over the edge. Now that he had his vision back, he could see a light filtering through a tiny gap at the foot of the shutter. “You been awake all night?”

“No I... I kinda fell asleep at some point. When I woke up it was quiet.”

“They might have moved on.” Richie pushed himself from the counter to stand. “One way to find out.”

Richie crossed the store and crouched next to the shutter, Eddie hovering closely behind. Hooking his hands under the shutter, Richie began to pull it up slowly, doing his best not to make any noise. A snarl ripped through the mall, followed by a clang as one of the runners crouched and wedged itself under the shutter, reaching an arm out to try and grab them.

Richie scrambled to his feet and kicked his foot down on the shutter, slamming the metal down into the zombie’s head. The zombie only snarled louder, unfazed as it flailed its arm around in an attempt to grab Richie’s leg.

“Fuck – skull’s too strong. It’s a fresh one!”

Eddie reached out and snagged the berretta from Richie’s waist, pointing it down at the zombie’s head and pulling the trigger. The deafening shot rang out, and the zombie’s movement ceased as blood pooled around his head.

“And that’s why we have a pistol.” Eddie said, shoving it back into Richie’s holster.

“Right – yeah – good going Eds. Okay, I need you to drag this guy in.”

“What?”

“We’re gonna need him.” Richie said, crouching to pull the shutter up another inch.

Eddie grabbed the zombie’s shirt and began to tug him, the sound of snarls sounding from beyond their metallic shield. Richie released the shutter to grab fistfuls of the zombie’s shirt, the two of them yanking the dead zombie into the store.

A clang sounded as another zombie crashed into the shutter but Eddie was fast, slamming his heel onto the base of the shutter to push it back down as the zombie crouched.

“Guess they didn’t move on after all.” Eddie said, looking down at the zombie they’d dragged under the shutter. “Why do we need him?”

“If you can’t beat ‘em, Eds, join ‘em.” Richie said, rolling the zombie over with his foot as he took out his knife. “Alright you rotted fuck, let’s see just how strong your smell is.”

Before Eddie could ask, Richie was slamming his knife down into zombie’s chest and dragging it down, cutting him open like he were a simple box. Eddie moved a hand to his mouth quickly as he gagged, attempting not to vomit while taking a step back from the zombie.

“That’s fucking disgusting.”

Richie nodded with a grin. “Perfect.”

“Have you completely lost it?”

“Trust me Eds, we need to do this. Now give me your coat.”

“*What?*”

“Trust me.”

Eddie shed his coat and held it out to Richie who grinned, bunching it up and shoving it down into the opened carcass of the zombie. This time Eddie *did* vomit. Richie said nothing, simply retracting his hands from inside the zombie and stepping over to Eddie where he pulled the jacket back on him before pulling off his own and repeating the process.

“What the hell are you doing?” Eddie asked as Richie pulled his own jacket back on.

“Blending in.” Richie dipped his hands into the zombie’s body again before reaching out and wiping pieces of his flesh and organs onto Eddie’s pants. “You wanna get out of here alive, right?”

“Yeah but –”

“Then trust me.” Richie hissed, wiping his hands on Eddie’s face. “Radio the others. Tell them to do the same.”

Eddie took in a few breaths, fighting the urge to vomit as he grabbed his radio and raised it to his mouth. “Hey, Richie’s got an idea on how to get by all the zombies. You need to let one into where you’re hiding. Cut it open and cover yourself in its blood.”

“Gross.” Beverly’s voice rang over the radio. *“I guess there’s nothing else we can do though. We’ll meet you guys at the entrance we came in through.”*

Richie dipped his hands back into the body of the zombie and then wiped them over his own pants and face, approaching Eddie and wiping the blood and guts down the back of his legs. “That should do.”

“Wait, turn around.” Eddie said, taking in a deep breath and plunging his hands into the zombie’s body. He wiped them on the back of Richie’s pants with a grimace and then made for his backpack, slinging it over his shoulder and grabbing his gun. “I packed anything useful last night. Let’s go get the others and go home.”

Richie slung his own bag over his shoulder with his rifle and together

they pulled up the shutter swiftly. The zombie that had tried to get in stared at them for a moment, sniffing the air before jerking his head away and stumbling off.

“Holy shit its working.” Eddie mumbled.

“I told you. Trust me.” Richie said, holding his hand out to Eddie. “I can get you out of here alive. I’ve done this with Stan before.”

Eddie nodded and reached out, taking Richie’s hand. “I’m trusting you. If I get bit I’m gonna make sure you’re the first human I come after.”

Richie smiled and began to walk. “Got it. Keep it slow though. If you run, you sweat. If you sweat, the blood runs. If the blood runs... we die.”

“Trial and error?”

“Yeah. Trial and error.”

Richie stumbled his way up the escalator, pulling Eddie along with him. A couple of zombies near the top of the escalator stopped to sniff them, deeming them not human before continuing on their way. Eddie’s shoulder bumped a female zombie as they passed, causing her to stumble. She tilted her head in their direction for a moment before sniffing and shuffling away.

They passed the store Beverly had told them about the night before, and Eddie could see a small pack of zombies inside, snarling and wandering around. Richie squeezed his hand, pulling him a little faster down the hallway.

“Nearly there Eds. You’re gonna make it h –”

Richie stopped suddenly, staring at something ahead. Eddie peered around him, finding the source of Richie’s sudden silence. There was only a few zombies between them and the doors, but the one that held Richie’s attention was a child no older than five.

“Hey, where awe we goin’ Wichie?” Lucy asked, dropping her arms onto Richie’s head and propping her chin on them as he carried her up the

empty street.

“The school.” Richie said, attempting to look up at her. “We’re gonna take you and your mom to the evacuation centre and they’re gonna get you out of here.”

“Yous coming wif us wight?”

“Yeah kid, I’m coming with you.”

“An’ Stanwe?”

“And Stanwe.”

“I really hope that name doesn’t stick.” Stan groaned.

*“She’s **five**, Stan.”*

Richie shook his head, his grip tightening on Eddie’s hand almost painfully. He’d been unable to save Lucy and her mom. He couldn’t save his dad from the infection when it hit the evacuation centre. He couldn’t save his mom when the crier had attacked. Stan could have died when the runner had grabbed him.

And he wasn’t about to repeat any of that with Eddie and a feral. He was going to get Eddie out alive.

Richie ran forward, forcing Eddie into a run. He shouldered the feral roughly who snarled and started to sprint after them, and Eddie felt his insides twist with the sickening realisation. The feral *knew*. It knew they were alive.

“Richie... it knows!”

“I know!” Richie shouted, skidding around a corner. “Just keep running!”

A shot rang out and Richie stopped dead for a moment, checking himself over for a wound. Ben stood just ahead of them with the spare hunting rifle raised, staring carefully through the scope. Eddie looked behind them, spotting the dead feral on the ground and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Come on let’s go!” Eddie said, taking the lead and dragging Richie along with him.

The truck was already parked outside of the mall, a blood covered Beverly in the driver’s seat.

“Get in! Now!”

“Get in! Now!”

Richie hoisted Eddie up quickly into the truck bed and jumped in after him as Ben climbed into the front, Beverly throwing the truck into gear and speeding off down the street.

7. Chapter 7

Richie had been silent since they'd left the mall, even when Eddie had dampened a rag and scrubbed some of the blood from his face. The most he'd managed was a thankful smile and a nod, and the same question was constantly swirling around in Eddie's mind.

How had seeing a feral managed to render Richie mute?

Eddie didn't ask. He didn't push the matter. He just simply cleaned the blood from Richie's face before doing his own; leaving them with pink smears where the blood had been.

"There you are!" Bill called, jogging over to them as they clambered out of the truck one by one, exhausted and covered in blood. "What happened to you out there?"

"We ran into a herd." Beverly said, reaching into the back of the truck and grabbing some of the bags, carrying them off towards the house.

"A herd?" Bill repeated, looking to the remaining three who were grabbing their bags.

"There were so many of them." Eddie said, pulling the gun bag over his shoulder. "We *really* have to leave this farm, Bill. Every town within a three hour driving distance is a fucking red zone now. How long before they start to move out of the towns? If we didn't have Richie, we wouldn't be here right now."

Richie only raised a hand in acknowledgement of what he'd done for the supply team, heading across the grounds towards the house. Bill watched Richie jog up the steps to where Stan stood, his friend digging a hand into his pocket and holding out a pack of cigarettes.

Richie hoisted himself onto the porch railing and removed a cigarette from the pack which he handed back to Stan. Holding the cigarette between his lips, Richie took the lighter that Stan was now holding out and clicked it, positioning himself on the railing with his back resting against the post at the edge of the steps.

They were too far away to hear what they were talking about, but Eddie had a feeling that Richie was filling him in on what had happened in Sanford.

“What’s the matter with him?” Bill asked, taking a couple of the bags from Eddie.

“He saw a feral and froze up.” Eddie said as they started to make their way across the grounds. “I don’t know why, and I didn’t think it was polite to ask.”

“Eddie, if he’s not right in the –”

“No. Shut up.” Eddie snapped, rounding on Bill before gesturing to his bloodied clothes. “You see this? This is what got us out of the mall alive. This isn’t the plan of someone who is crazy. This is the result of someone who *really* knows what they’re doing.”

Eddie turned sharply, jogging across the remainder of the grounds before taking the porch steps quickly and heading into the house. He dumped his bags in the hallway with the rest of them, spotting Ben and Beverly in the kitchen before heading up the stairs for a shower.

Richie was still outside when Eddie had finished with his shower, sitting in the same spot with a fresh cigarette, the pack now resting on the rail under his bent leg though Stan was no longer with him. Eddie watched him from the curved living room window for a moment, Richie twisting the cigarette to rest in the corner of his mouth with his head angled to look out at the camp.

“He’ll be fine.”

Eddie jumped, turning to see Stan who was now standing in the doorway, leaning against it to take as much pressure off his foot as possible. He looked so different to the first day he’d arrived in camp in his smart looking clothes that were covered in blood, now wearing a baggy shirt that hung over equally baggy sweatpants; both of which Eddie knew belonged to Bill.

“Couldn’t find clothes in your size here?” Eddie teased, turning his back on the window.

“Oh we found some.” Stan said, folding his arms lazily across his stomach. “It’s just these are easier to take off.”

“You wanna try that again?”

“For when I need to take a bath, you gross little man.” Stan said, shaking his head with a smile. “Bill had to cut my pants up to get them over the brace since it’s kind of holding the splints in place and he figured these would just be easier for next time.”

“And the shirt?”

“Completes the look I guess.” Stan shrugged. “I don’t know. Bill just threw some clothes into the bathroom like: *hey wear these.*”

Eddie nodded, glancing back out the window. Just beyond where Richie sat he could see people loading various things into the cars they’d be assigned; ready to move their camp the following morning.

No one wanted to stay in a place where the surrounding towns and cities had become red zones and the supplies were lacking.

“It’s survivor’s guilt.” Stan said, slowly pushing up from the doorframe, keeping a hand curled around it. “But he’ll be fine. He just needs to straighten out his head a little and smoke all my cigarettes like a jerk. Just... I don’t know. Give him time and make sure he eats or something. If he wants to talk about what’s bothering him, he will.”

“Survivor’s guilt... got it. Why would you –”

A smile came to Stan’s face as he turned awkwardly, foot brace thunking on the ground. “Because if you’re gonna be Richie’s friend, you need to know these things. He said you didn’t push him for details on the way back. He likes that.”

“Is that what you did?”

“Both before and during the outbreak.” Stan said, limping off up the hallway.

By the time Mike’s parents had prepared dinner for the camp, Richie

still hadn't returned. While Bill, Georgie, Beverly, and Mike were constantly in and out of the house taking bowls of soup to the people of the camp as they did every night, Eddie grabbed a couple of bowls and made his way to the porch.

Richie was exactly where they'd left him, a half empty pack of cigarettes in front of him and one in his mouth that was almost finished.

"Here." Eddie held out one of the bowls to Richie. "You gotta eat something, Rich."

Richie flicked his cigarette away and took the bowl. "Thanks."

Finally he'd gotten a word out of him. Eddie nodded and leaned his back against the railing. "Stan seems to be walking better."

"That's good. I was worried we might have to amputate." Richie said, stirring his spoon lazily in the soup. "How are you and the others doing?"

"We're alive thanks to you, so we're pretty damn good right about now."

Richie nodded, falling silent for a moment to eat. After a few mouthfuls, he placed the spoon back into the bowl with a clang. "About the mall..." Eddie angled his head towards Richie and arched a brow to show he was listening, spoon hanging from his mouth. "I'm sorry I froze up."

Eddie removed the spoon from his mouth. "Hey, everyone does it. It shows you're still human in there despite everything."

Richie hummed, almost thoughtfully. "When I saw the feral, it reminded me of a little girl back at the evacuation centre we were in. She was five too."

"That's normal." Eddie said, placing his bowl onto the railing and moving closer. "We went to a school once to get some supplies. There was a zombie dressed like a janitor there and Beverly froze up. She couldn't kill it. It reminded her of her father, and even though he was the biggest asshole you ever met... she just *couldn't*. Ben killed it for

her. We all have something like that.”

Richie opened his mouth to speak, the sound of a scream cutting him off.

“What the fuck was that?” Eddie asked.

“Not good.” Richie said, jumping from the railing and dropping his own bowl onto the ground.

Eddie hastily climbed the railing and jumped over, chasing after Richie. Ahead, he could see Bill already heading in the direction of the scream. There were a few tents pitched towards the edge of the camp where a woman was clutching a terrified child by his shoulders.

“What’s wrong?” Bill asked, slowing to a stop by the family.

“He was near the river.” The woman said, panic covering her face. “He said there were zombies across there! They’re getting close to the camp!”

“It’s probably just some shamblers.” Richie said, panting from the effort of running.

Bill nodded, an uneasy expression on his face. “We should still check it out.”

“It’s too dark, Bill.” Eddie said.

“We have flashlights.” Richie said. “We *have* to check it out.”

“He’s right Eddie. We have to.” Bill placed a comforting hand to the woman’s arm. “Move your family closer to the house and make sure others do too. We’re leaving in the morning and I want everyone close so we can protect you better.”

The woman nodded and the three of took off into the surrounding woodlands, Richie removing the flashlight from his belt and turning it on; holding it high above his head.

“Footprints here. Must be the kid.” Eddie said, pointing to some

indents in the ground in front of him.

Richie turned the flashlight to where Eddie was pointing. "Yeah they're small. We need to follow these to the river."

"Do you really think they were just shamblers?" Bill asked, fiddling with something on the scope of his sniper before lifting it to his face.

"Unless they learned how to jump or swim we're good."

"That's not funny, Rich." Eddie hissed, taking out his own flashlight.

Richie grimaced, stepping over a tree root. "Who said I was joking? We got runners, ferals, and criers. Jumpers and swimmers wouldn't be that surprising."

The riverside was empty when they arrived; no signs of the dead anywhere. Eddie pointed his flashlight down into the river, looking for signs of the zombies the child had seen.

"Nothing." Bill said, surveying the area carefully with his scope. "The river is a twenty foot drop and it would have washed them away. Current is too strong."

"Unless they can swim." Richie reminded him.

"They'd have to be able to climb too." Eddie said, crouching and pointing his flashlight into the crevice. "And I don't see anything climbing up."

"You think they just shuffled away?" Bill asked.

Richie shook his head. "Shamblers are too slow. We'd still see them. They must have been runners or something. It could be something following the river and looking for a way over."

Eddie cringed. "That is a horrifying thought."

"The farm is surrounded by barbed fences." Bill said, lowering his sniper. "It'll be safe. There's always someone patrolling around the edges."

“Right – yeah.” Richie furrowed his brow, staring across the river before holding his hand out to Bill. “Hey can I borrow that?”

Bill handed him the sniper and Richie took it, lifting it to his face to look through the scope; world turning green from the night-vision. Pointing it at the other side of the river, Richie focused his attention on the ground.

“Shit.”

“What?” Eddie asked.

“There’s footprints there and... they look like –”

A scream echoed behind them and the three of them tensed.

“The camp.” Bill breathed, breaking off into a run.

The three of them dashed through the woodland, the screams increasing with the sound of gunshots and shouts as they ducked under low branches and jumped tree roots. The camp itself was chaotic when they broke the treeline and Richie felt his chest tighten.

It was just like the evacuation centre. Zombies were running across the grounds, slamming into people and knocking them down while those who remained attempted to put an end to their reanimated state.

In the chaos that had taken over, Bill spotted Georgie supporting Stan as they made for the vehicles parked near the gate. They were wielding a pistol each; firing at anything that ran towards them, and Georgie had outfitted Stan with a couple of bags they hadn’t managed to pack into one of the cars yet; including the one he and Richie had arrived at the farm with.

“Bill!” Georgie shouted, changing his direction for the small group.

“What happened?” Bill asked when they were close enough.

“I don’t know! People just started screaming and then there were zombies all over the place! Mike said one of those things was *leaping*. Bev managed to put it down but I haven’t seen her since! We’re

trying to get everyone we can out of here!”

Richie handed the sniper back to Bill. “Get Stan somewhere safe. I’m gonna go back to the house. I still smell like them for the most part so I can see if anyone is in there.”

“I’m coming with you.” Eddie said. When Richie went to argue with him, Eddie shot him a glare. “You can’t go alone. If you don’t smell strong enough you could get swarmed.”

“Eddie. You remember the meet up spot we planned in case this happened?” Bill asked, turning sharply and smacking the butt of his sniper into the head of an oncoming runner, its skull cracking from the force.

Eddie nodded, removing the knife from his side. “Yeah. I remember.”

“I’m gonna take Stan and Georgie there. If you see anyone else tell them to go there.”

“Got it. I’ll bring Richie back to you alive Stan.”

Stan snorted, though Eddie didn’t miss the slight smile on his face. “I trust you Eddie. Richie, here.” He removed the duffle bag from his shoulder and held it out. “You’re gonna need this shit.”

Richie took the bag and slung it over his shoulder. “Thanks. See you soon, Staniel!”

“Soon Rich.” Stan agreed. “*Alive.*”

Georgie tightened his hold on Stan’s arm and the three of them took off across the camp. Richie unzipped the duffle bag at his side, reaching in and taking out a machete which he held out to Eddie.

“It’s better than that little knife, I can assure you.”

Eddie returned the knife to his side and took the machete. “What about you?”

Richie reached back into the bag to extract a tanto from its depths. “Let’s just say I’m heavily prepared.”

Eddie only nodded, tightening his grip on the machete's handle. Richie zipped the duffle bag back up and the two of them broke into a run across the farm grounds towards the house.

Notes for the Chapter:

Quick note for anyone who doesn't know what a tanto is, it's a very small type of Katana that's dagger-sized, and you should be getting the stranger things kids soonish now these guys are been driven from their camp!

8. Chapter 8

“Okay, get in Georgie.” Bill said, supporting Stan in Georgie’s place, while his other arm held the door open awkwardly; pistol aimed over it.

Georgie hoisted himself into the truck and slid across the seat into the middle, reaching his hand out to take the remaining bag from Stan which he shoved into the small space behind the seats. Bill could see Richie and Eddie across the camp, the two of them jogging up the porch steps as quickly as they could.

Eddie turned sharply and slammed his machete down into a zombie’s head, backing up the steps slowly to cover Richie as they made their way into the house.

“They made it inside.” Bill said, patting Stan’s shoulder. “Time to get you out of here Stan.”

Georgie helped Stan from inside the truck, Bill slamming the door once he was seated. He circled around the front of the truck quickly, Georgie leaning over to open the door for him. Bill paused only to shoot an oncoming zombie before hastily climbing into the truck and slamming the door shut and shoving the key into the ignition.

“Get anything we might need that we don’t already have.” Richie said, peering into the living room. “There doesn’t seem to be any zombies in here.”

Eddie nodded and made his way up the stairs, leaving Richie alone in the living room. Richie glanced out of the window in time to see the truck reverse quickly from its space and take off, heading for the already opened gate, knocking a zombie to the side that was stumbling through.

Someone else had made it out before them.

Eddie came running down the stairs with a backpack slung over his shoulder, grabbing two sets of keys from a hook next to the door.

“Let me guess.” Richie said, adjusting his grip on the now bloody tanto. “You never unpack anything important of yours.”

Eddie shook his head, grabbing his rifle from next to the door. “We knew something like this could happen. We kept some important things packed just in case.”

Richie nodded, and they stepped out onto the porch where he retrieved the hunting rifle. “You know which car those are for?”

“Ain’t got a clue.”

“This should be fun.”

“Eddie! Richie!” Mike’s voice called over the snarls around them as he ran across the grounds towards them, stopping to shoot one of the runners that was heading for him.

Mike’s father was standing just behind him, shotgun in hand as he fired at a cluster of zombies that were threatening to close in on them. “We gotta go Mikey!”

“Here.” Eddie tossed a set of keys to Mike who caught them, looking them over.

“Station Wagon. Let’s go!” Mike shouted.

“Can’t all fit in one car.” Eddie said, holding up the other set of keys. “We’ll take another car.”

“Eddie –”

“No Mike. There might still be some people here alive. We’re gonna check the barn to make sure. Take your parents and go for the place we agreed to meet up at.”

Mike nodded and William held out his shotgun to Eddie. “You guys are gonna need this more than us.”

“Mustang.” Mike said. “The keys in your hand are for the Mustang.”

Richie turned sharply and grabbed Eddie by his shoulders. “Eddie, I

need you to go to the car. Hear me out. Getting into the barn is easy, but if they see us go in... we might not be able to get back out. Go with Mike and get the car and come back for me. Haven't you noticed? They're not coming for me. I still *smell* like them, Eds. You don't."

Eddie nodded unsurely and the group split with Richie making a dash for the barn. A snarl ripped across the grounds as one of the runners dashed by and Richie breathed a sigh of relief. His guess was right. They couldn't smell him. He could get to the barn.

Sharon Denbrough was the only person in the barn save for one of the camp's children that was hiding behind her. The woman protecting her slammed the pitchfork she was holding into the stomach of an oncoming zombie, shoving them back until the sharp points hit the wall and pinned the zombie in place.

Richie removed his jacket as he ran across barn, tossing it over the child's head. "Come on, we gotta go."

"Where's Bill?" Sharon asked, worry clear on her face.

"Gone. He got out. He took Georgie too." Richie said, lifting the child easily into his arms.

Sharon sighed in relief. "Good, because I don't think I can make it off this farm."

"You been bitten?"

"No."

"Then you're gonna make it."

"Those things are *everywhere*."

"We can make it. I've gotten out of this situation before."

A small cluster of zombies converged outside of the barn, and Eddie took in a deep breath, pressing his foot down more on the mustang's accelerator. The Mustang sped across the field, slamming into the group of zombies with a loud bang.

Turning the wheel sharply, the sound of screeching echoed around him as the car turned awkwardly before he slammed his foot down on the brake, jerking in the seat from the sudden stop.

He could see Richie running towards the car, winding the window down as he grabbed his pistol and hung out of the car far enough to fire at the remainder of the cluster that had stumbled to their feet and were now in pursuit. Richie yanked open the back door as he set the child down, removing the jacket from her head.

“Okay, you’re okay now, in the car.” Richie said soothingly, holding it open for the child who clambered into the back, followed shortly by Sharon. “Time to go Eds!”

Eddie nodded, ducking back into the car as Richie slammed the back door shut and made his way to the front, yanking the door open and jumping into the seat.

“You’re crazy, you know that right?” Eddie asked as Richie slammed the door.

“I’m not the one who just played *hit and run* with a bunch of zombies.” Richie shot playfully. “Get us out of here, Eds.”

Eddie nodded and threw the car into gear.

Georgie had fallen asleep at some point into the drive, propped up awkwardly against Stan and pushing him into the door. They’d reached the highway and Bill had parked next to an overturned bus, relieved when he saw Beverly and Ben already there with one of the other trucks; both bloodied but otherwise fine.

“Where are the others?” Beverly asked, concern creeping into her voice when Bill got out of the truck.

“Richie and Eddie were gonna check for others. I didn’t see Mike anywhere.”

“How long do we wait for them?” Ben asked, looking around the highway as Stan climbed awkwardly out of the truck now that Georgie had woken up. “We’re out in the open here.”

“We’ll wait until the morning. If no one’s here by then –”

“We can’t just leave them.” Beverly said. “We have to go back!”

“We *can’t* go back.” Ben said. “That place is overrun with zombies now. If they’re still alive, they’ll have made it out and they’ll be coming here. This is where we said for everyone to go. Anyone still alive –”

“The radio!” Beverly said, fumbling with the radio on her belt. “Mike and Eddie both have one. If they’re alive...” She brought the radio to her mouth, closing her eyes as she pushed the button down, praying that someone would answer. “Hey guys, its Beverly here. I’m with Ben, Stan, Bill, and Georgie. We’re safe. *Please* tell me you’re safe too. *Please* respond.”

“What if we’re out of range?” Georgie asked tiredly, rubbing at one of his eyes as he joined them. “If we’re out of range they won’t get the message.”

“Then I’ll keep trying until–”

“Hey, Mike here. I’m safe. I’m with my parents. We’re coming. We’re safe.”

Worry crossed Beverly’s face. “What about Eddie and Richie?”

“Dunno. Last I saw, Richie was heading for the barn to check for survivors and Eddie was grabbing one of the cars. I haven’t seen them since. They might be –”

“Hey, I’m still alive asshole.” Richie’s voice hissed tiredly. *“I was just sleeping. Do you know how tiring my last few days have been?”*

Stan took the radio from Beverly. “Richie? How you doin’?”

“Alive and kicking. Jesus Eds, don’t swerve so hard.”

“Eddie’s with you?” Beverly asked. “Is there anyone else?”

“I got a Sharon and a little girl. None one else.”

Georgie grinned and snagged the radio from Stan. "Mom? Mom's with you?"

"Yeah. She was in the bar – Eds if you don't start driving like a normal person I will make you pull over and switch seats with me."

"Shut up Richie. There was a zombie! You want me to crash into it?"

"You're about to crash into a tree if you keep swerving! Just knock 'em the fuck down!"

"They're okay." Beverly said, her face breaking out into a grin.

"We went from twenty-eight to twelve." Bill said, grimacing. "What happened?"

Beverly sighed. "Something jumped into the camp and pounced on someone. By the time I managed to kill it, it was too late."

"Jumpers." Richie's voice reached them. "That's a fucking horrifying thought. That's what I was trying to say at the river. The footprints on the other side looked like something had launched itself across. We must have passed it when we went to check it out."

"Bill." Ben nodded to something behind them. "Slow one."

Bill turned and raised the sniper, pulling the trigger. The zombie's body jerked back and fell, smacking into an abandoned car.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Mike's voice asked. "We have to worry about jumping zombies now too?"

"And probably a lot worse." Richie sighed.

"We need a plan, guys." Beverly said. "We can't just stay here."

"I hear Indiana is nice this time of year." Richie said. "I heard there were still some evacuation centres out there but that was a few months ago."

"Wasn't there a CDC place just outside of Hawkins?" Ben asked, brow furrowed. "Maybe it's still there."

"It's our only lead." Bill said. "We should head there."

"Sounds good to me." Mike said. *"If it's not there, there's definitely one in Atlanta."*

"Looks like we got a plan!" Richie called over the radio. *"See you guys when we get to the highway. Shouldn't be long now."*

9. Chapter 9

Notes for the Chapter:

Have a couple of fluffy moments because you all deserve it and so do they!

Richie tapped his fingers idly on the steering wheel, glancing once in a while to the sleeping Eddie in the passenger seat. Stan was sitting in the back of the mustang, legs stretched out to prop up his broken ankle while his back was pressed against one of the doors, head angled awkwardly against the seat as he slept.

They'd ditched one of the trucks on the highway, emptying its contents into the trunk of the mustang and the bed of the other truck; Ben and Beverly now riding with Mike and his parents at the front of their small convoy to cut down on the amount of vehicles they would need to take care of, just in front of the truck Bill was driving with Georgie, Sharon, and the child they'd saved; Melanie.

Glancing at the dashboard, Richie sighed, reaching out for the radio in Eddie's lap and bringing it to his mouth. "Hey I'm about to be running on fumes here. We need to make a gas stop."

"Got it." Mike's voice sounded over the radio. *"There's a gas station in about three miles. We can get gas and take a break. We've been travelling for hours."*

"Sounds good." Richie said, dropping the radio into his lap. He started to idly tap at the wheel again, humming quietly to himself.

Eddie stirred when the soft hum of the engine stopped about fifteen minutes later, sitting upright in his seat as blinked away the sleep from his eyes. "Why're we stopping?"

"Gas." Richie said, shoving the brake on. "We've also been driving for hours and we need a place to rest."

"How long was I out?"

"Not long." Richie unbuckled his seatbelt and twisted to lean into the

back where he shook Stan. "Rise and shine my delicate little flower."

Stan swatted at his hand tiredly. "Where the hell are we?"

"Somewhere near Hartford. We get to hold up in a gas station tonight."

"The joy." Stan grumbled, slowly swinging his legs over the edge of the seat.

Richie climbed out of the car with the radio firmly in his grip and moved to the back, opening the door and helping Stan to awkwardly climb out. Ben and Beverly were already heading into the station to check for zombies, and Richie carefully propped Stan against the car so he could close the door.

"Do you think you can walk or do I need to carry you again?" Richie asked, grinning over at Stan. Stan pushed himself up off the car wordlessly and began to limp his way across the gas station. "Well that answers that."

Eddie snorted, pulling the strap of his rifle over his shoulder. "He's getting better."

"He is."

"There were no zombies inside." Beverly said as she stepped out of the station with a gas can in each hand. "We found a lot of these though. We can fill them up and take them with us so we don't have to stop anywhere for gas."

Mike nodded, holding his hands out for the cans which Beverly handed over to him. "I'll get started on filling these up. You and Ben need to make sure you get some rest. You haven't had much of it since you went to Sanford with everything that happened. Eddie, you and Richie too! If I come into that station and you guys aren't sleeping I will force you to sleep by any means necessary even if it means knocking you out!"

Richie waved Mike off, already heading into the station with a slight stumble. "Yeah, yeah, I'll get some sleep."

“Sorry Rich.” Stan said as they joined him inside where Sharon and Melanie were setting out an array of sleeping bags for the group to use. “If my ankle wasn’t broken I could have been driving for a while. You and Eddie are too tired for this.”

“No worries Staniel. You can make it up to me when your foot has healed and you’re good as new.”

Stan rolled his eyes, leaning against the counter with his hands braced against it; relieving the pressure from his foot. “Sure thing Rich.”

Mike and Georgie kept watch over the group that night, both of them standing in front of the large glass windows. So far they’d heard no sounds of zombies; just the snoring people sleeping around them. Eddie watched them from his spot as they turned to face each other and whispered something, Mike chuckling.

“Can’t sleep?”

Eddie had almost forgotten Richie was lying just in front of him, hands tucked carefully under his head as he stared up at the ceiling. “No. I guess everything is just now sinking in since we have a moment to breathe. What about you?”

“I’m used to barely sleeping.” Richie admitted. “It also might have something to do with this freezing cold floor.”

“Well you’re the one who gave up your sleeping bag.”

“To a *child* Eds, come on man. Don’t tell me you’re that cruel. Even Bill gave his up to an invalid.”

Eddie snorted. “No, I’m not that cruel. Come here.”

“What?”

“I can’t have you fucking freezing to death. I’m kinda getting used to having you around.” Eddie shifted, and Richie could hear the sound of the sleeping bag unzipping. “Now get in here and warm up. You can either do this willingly or we can involve Mike.”

Mike chuckled. "I'll come over there if I have to. I'm strong enough to throw you in there."

"Alright, alright, fine." Richie groaned, slowly pushing himself to his hands and knees to crawl across the space between himself and Eddie.

"Now was that so hard?" Eddie hissed, reaching around Richie to zip up the bag as much as he could once he'd climbed inside.

"This is a really tight squeeze."

"I know but what else can we do? Do you want to freeze to death?"

"Not really, no." Richie sighed, dropping an arm over Eddie.

Eddie yawned, tucking his head under Richie's chin. He'd expected Richie to move away and put as much distance between them as he could in the small space, but Richie tightened his arm around him instead; letting out a soft sigh.

"Get some sleep, Eds."

"Oblivious fucking idiots." Stan hissed from across the gas station.

"Not the term I'd use." Bill said, shaking his head as he held out a tub of pills to Stan with a bottle of water. "Here. You're gonna need these to sleep through the rest of the night."

"Thanks Bill." Stan unscrewed the tub and fished out a couple of pills.

"Don't worry about it Stan."

The following morning, they packed their things quickly and threw them into the back of the truck, along with the filled gas cans for the road. Eddie slammed the trunk of the mustang down, taking his rifle from Bill.

"Where's Richie?"

Bill nodded away from the gas station where Richie was standing at

the edge of the field on the other side of the road, cigarette hanging from his mouth and his pistol held in his free hand; just in case.

“Said he needed a smoke before hitting the road.” Bill said.

Eddie tucked his hands into his pockets and jogged across the road to where Richie stood. “Hey, we’re getting ready to head out.”

Richie nodded, shifting the cigarette in his mouth and blowing out some smoke. “I’ll be finished in a minute.”

“You should let me drive today, Richie. I know you didn’t sleep as much as I did last night. You can take a nap in the car.” Eddie said.

Richie looked like he was debating it for a moment before digging a hand into his pocket and fishing out the keys, tossing them to Eddie. “I don’t trust myself to drive anyway.”

Eddie caught the keys in hands. “But you were going to?”

“Didn’t know if you were feeling better.”

“I’m fine now. What about you?”

Richie snorted, tilting his head away to blow some more smoke from his mouth. “I’m fine now.”

“That’s good.” Eddie said, smiling up at him. “Hey, about Sanford I... I didn’t get a chance to say this before with everything going on but I wanted to thank you. You got me somewhere safe in the mall and then you got me out alive. You got *everyone* out alive. We would have died if you weren’t there and now... you got me off that farm and to here.”

Richie’s expression was unreadable as he removed the cigarette from his mouth and dropped it to the ground, pressing his foot down onto it. Eddie was sure he wasn’t going to say anything, but then he smiled and raised a hand, ruffling Eddie’s hair. “You’re welcome.”

“Why’d you do it anyway? Was it because Bill saved you?”

“Nope.” Richie began walk away backwards across the road, the

smile still on his face. "Couldn't let the cutest guy I ever saw die now, could I?"

Richie turned away from him and Eddie watched him retreat to the cars on the gas station parking lot before shaking his head and following him.

"I'm riding with you guys today." Bill said as they reached the car. "The truck's a bit cramped with four people using it."

"Sure, but you're in back taking care of Staniel." Richie said, opening the passenger door and climbing in.

"You're not driving?" Stan asked as he carefully climbed into the car.

"Eddie is."

"Thank fuck for that."

Eddie let out a laugh while Richie sulked in his seat, climbing into the driver's seat. Once Bill was seated, Richie leaned into the back to help adjust Stan to sit with his back to the door again and his legs propped up on Bill's lap. Bill hunted out the tub of painkillers and handed them to Stan who immediately uncapped the tub and tossed one of the pills into his mouth.

"Still in some pain there, Staniel?" Richie asked, leaning into the back again to hand Stan a bottle of water as Eddie pulled away from the gas station.

Stan swallowed the pill with a grimace, taking the offered bottle of water. "Yup."

"You're gonna be okay soon, you know that, right?"

Stan nodded as he took a swing of the water, wiping the bottle with the arm of his shirt before capping it again and handing it back to Richie.

Richie snorted, shoving the bottle back into the duffle bag. "You know your saliva is like... the least of my worries right now, don't you?"

“That’s not the point Richie.”

“I’ve also had worse things in my mouth than Staniel germs.”

“Gross. I don’t need details on the sexcapades you’ve done in life.” Stan said, leaning back against the car door. “It’s bad enough I had to hear some of them.”

“Hey, I got you earplugs.”

“They clearly didn’t work since I could still hear random guys screaming your name.”

Richie rolled his eyes, staring out the window at the truck in front of them. “I’m starting to think you were just jealous.”

“Shut up Tozier.”

“Oh, are we on last name terms now Uris? Cause I can do this all day.”

“Please *don’t*.” Eddie groaned. “I can’t handle this all day. I can and will pull over and make someone trade with one of you.”

“It’s gotta be Richie.” Bill said, shaking his head in amusement. “It takes too much time to move Stan around. We can just push him out the door.”

“Good point.”

Richie groaned, leaning his head back against his seat. “I feel very attacked right now.”

In his peripheral vision he could see Eddie smiling, his attention fixed on following the truck in front of them; one hand resting on the wheel while the other tapped against the gear shift idly. His nails made a quiet clinking against the smooth plastic, creating a comfortable rhythm.

“Hey Rich?” Stan asked ten minutes later, breaking the comfortable silence. Richie hummed to show he was listening though his eyes were closed. “How are you feeling now?”

Richie smiled. “Better – definitely better.”

“Good.” Stan was smiling now too, shifting his leg to nudge his knee against the back of Richie’s seat. “Hey Richieeeee?”

“What Stan?”

“How do zombies tell their future?”

“What are you –”

“With a *horrorscope*.”

Richie laughed, the sound contagious until the other occupants of the car had joined in. Richie managed to compose himself before the others, taking in a few calming breaths while Stan seemed rather proud of his completely awful joke.

“Staniel are you fucking high on painkillers?” Richie asked, the laughter still present in his voice.

“I’m not high.” Stan said, staring at Richie with a frown. “You’re just shorter than me. Maybe you should try growing.”

“*Ohmygod*. Bill how many of those painkillers you given him today?”

10. Chapter 10

Notes for the Chapter:

Have some more fluffy moments because I am about to do mean things so you're all gonna need this.

By nightfall they had reached an abandoned motel about five hours from Hawkins with a large sign in the window that read *MOTEL CLOSED DUE TO SICKNESS*. While some of the group had wanted to keep pushing through until they reached their destination, they knew it was impossible.

Travelling at night was too dangerous; especially into a town or city with one injured person.

Richie shouldered open the door to the reception area with Bill right behind him ready to shoot anything that moved. The room was dusty and cold, various items scattered around as though there had been a struggle. Richie crept across to the counter with his pistol in hand and peered over, finding the area just behind it empty.

"We're good." Richie said, shoving his pistol back into its holster.

Mike walked into the room with his flashlight raised, pointing it to an official CDC flier pinned to the wall. "Official instructions from the CDC. Report the sick. Stay inside. Barricade windows and doors. Wait for help."

"I've said it before and I'll say it again." Eddie said, stepping into the reception area and taking a look around. "Wait my ass."

"I'll tell you what my official instructions are." Beverly said, heading for the counter. "Kill all sons of bitches."

Richie high-fived her before jumping the counter and looking over the keys. "How many rooms do we need?"

"Probably a good idea not to use too many." Mike said, turning his back on the flier. "Maybe four? We need people on watch and everyone else should be close together."

Richie nodded, reaching for four keys on the row for the first floor rooms. "If I share a room with Eds I can take a watch shift with him. Saves us waking people up."

"Yeah, *that's* why." Stan said, rubbing at his temples. "I'm having the worst painkiller crash known to man right now. Why did you let me take so many?"

"Bill's in charge of your painkiller intake, not me."

"Okay, so if Eddie and Richie rest first, Ben and I can take the first watch." Beverly said. "We can wake them up and use their room."

"Sounds good." Richie said, jumping the counter again and tossing a couple of the keys to Bill. "Guard the princess well, Billiam. He's a menace and fences do not like him."

"I hate you." Stan groaned.

"No you don't." Richie said, tossing another set of keys to Mike. "Come on Eds, I have a motel bed to pass out on."

"This is going to be really gross." Eddie complained, following Richie from the reception.

"Gross buy comfy, and right now the comfort factor is winning."

"We got the water working." Ben said, joining them in front of the building. "We can shower at least. I think we all need it after the farm."

Richie did not sleep that night. He lay awake on the bed, hands laid on his stomach with his fingers tapping against the blanket while he stared at the ceiling; once in a while catching the noise of Ben or Beverly whenever they passed the room.

The bed let out a creak as Eddie shifted, uncurling himself and rolling over so he was now facing Richie. "You're *still* awake?"

Richie snorted, tilting his head towards Eddie. "I can't help it Eds. It's just something you pick up when it's just two of you out there."

Eddie furrowed his brow. "You slept fine last night."

"That sleeping bag was *very* comforting and warm."

Eddie was the one to snort now, a smile coming to his face. "Nope, I don't think that was the reason. You know what *I* think?"

"What do you think, Eds?"

"I think you're afraid to go to sleep because you don't feel safe. That's why you slept last night. You felt safe. You slept in the car for a while earlier too."

Richie clenched his jaw and swallowed. "You know something, Eds? I think you're too damn observant for your own good."

"Bill says that too. Why don't you feel safe, Rich? Ben and Beverly are capable of keeping everyone safe. Mike and Georgie were too."

"It's not that. I know they're capable. I know all of you are." Richie sighed, shifting and rolling onto his side. "It's just..."

Eddie furrowed his brow, shifting higher on the bed so his face was level with Richie's. "It's just what?"

"I – I've seen a lot of stuff out there, you know? A lot of death... a lot more than you guys have by the sounds of it." Richie paused, his jaw clenching again and Eddie didn't speak, waiting patiently for him to gather his thoughts more coherently and continue. "When I'm awake... when I'm out there... I have control over everything I do. I have control over what happens to me, to you guys, but... when I'm asleep... I don't have that control and it scares me."

"So you're afraid of sleeping... but... last night... you weren't. You felt safe..."

Eddie fell silent for a moment, his brow furrowing again as he tried to piece everything together. When Richie opened his mouth to speak, Eddie raised his hand, covering his mouth with a finger. He needed to work this out and Richie talking would distract him from doing that.

Richie hadn't really slept in a year since the start of the outbreak outside of power naps when his body screamed for it because he was afraid to. He had Stan there the entire time but he was still afraid to sleep. He hadn't slept much at the evacuation camp because he still didn't feel safe even with the armed guards. He didn't sleep on the ride back to the farm with Bill. He didn't sleep much on his first night at the farm.

He slept in the gun store. He slept for a while on the way back from Sanford. He slept in the car on the way to the highway. He slept in the gas station perfectly fine. He slept in the car for a couple of hours on their way to here. He did that because...

Because...

Oh.

"I made you feel safe." Eddie said, slowly removing his finger from Richie's mouth. "That's why, isn't it? Despite the fact you can't control what happens when you're asleep... I made you feel safe."

Richie's expression was unreadable, much like it had been outside the gas station. He took in a breath, exhaling slowly in a soft sigh. "Yeah. You did. I don't know why. There's just... something comforting about you I guess."

Eddie smiled. "Wait right here. Do not leave this bed."

"Where am I gonna go, Eds?"

Eddie snorted at that. "Good point. Just... wait okay?"

Before Richie could respond, Eddie had climbed out of the bed and made his way to the door of their shared room before slipping outside, closing it softly behind him.

"Is something wrong?" Beverly asked, concern on her face. She was sitting on the railing of the first floor, the fluffy red blanket wrapped around her shoulders and a rifle resting against her front while Ben was pacing the walkway. "You're not due to wake up for another couple of hours yet."

“He doesn’t sleep.” Eddie said, his gaze meeting Beverly’s. “He doesn’t sleep, and he shouldn’t be taking a watch shift. He needs to sleep. I need him to sleep. He’s our driver.”

Beverly’s eyes were full of nothing but understanding, a smile coming to her face. “You got it Eddie. We’ll wake Bill and Mike up instead and explain what’s going on. You just make sure he sleeps.”

Eddie nodded and then vanished back into the room. Richie was right where he left him; facing the window and wide awake. He crawled back into the space next to Richie, pulling the blanket back around him for warmth.

“Roll over with your back to me.” He’d expected Richie to argue or not comply, surprised when Richie actually rolled over as instructed without a word. Carefully, Eddie reached out, sliding an arm around Richie and pulling him back until his back was against his chest. “Now sleep. I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. We don’t even have to do watch duty tonight. Your priority is to actually sleep.”

A couple of hours later, Beverly slowly pushed the door open to the room that Bill, Mike, and Stan were using. The motel beds, though big, apparently weren’t quite big enough for three people, and Stan was wedged somewhat awkwardly between Bill and Mike, curled almost child-like into Bill’s chest with his head tucked under his chin while Mike had tried to put as much distance as he could between himself and Stan; almost hanging off the end of the bed.

Beverly suspected this was due to Stan’s injury because she knew from experience that he slept more like a starfish than anything.

“I feel bad for waking them up.” Beverly whispered to Ben. “Just look at them.”

“I know. They look so comfy.” Ben whispered.

“Think we can handle a full night shift?” Beverly asked. “We can sleep in the car tomorrow. We’re not the ones driving.”

Ben smiled, lacing his fingers through Beverly’s and pulling her back from the room. “Yeah, we got this. We’re capable. We had a full

night's sleep last night and we haven't seen a single zombie since we pulled onto the parking lot."

Beverly closed the door behind them, a smile of her own on her face as she leaned up to press her lips softly to Ben's. "They're all such oblivious idiots, aren't they? I'm tired of watching the watch each other when they think the other isn't looking. All of them. Idiots."

Ben chuckled. "But they're *our* idiots."

"Yeah, they are, and Momma Bev is going to knock some sense into them sooner or later."

"It's more fun to just let them figure it out." Ben said, an amused smile on his face. "Think how great it will be when it hits them and they're just like *oh*."

Beverly giggled, shushing the sound behind her hand. "They're just too cute."

Ben picked up the sniper resting against the railing, turning to kiss Beverly again before continuing his round of pacing, watching carefully for anything that might stumble along the motel.

11. Chapter 11

“We should fan out. Groups of three. I’ll take Richie and Eddie.” Bill said, checking the streets around them cautiously as he spoke.

So far Hawkins seemed void of life; undead or otherwise. Cars and general litter were spread all over the streets, and neighbourhood they’d ended up in was no different. It reminded Richie of how Sanford had been and he could already feel his throat constricting at the memory of how *that* had turned out.

Richie felt a hand take his, glancing down at Eddie who was now squeezing his hand comfortingly as though he’d read his mind. No one else had seemed to notice the exchange, and Eddie had released his hand before Bill had turned back to look at them.

“I’ll take Ben and Stan.” Beverly said, already veering off to the houses on their right.

The house that Bill’s group headed to was already open, the front door barely hanging off its hinges as though something (possibly a runner as they seemed to be strong) had crashed into it. Richie bent to pick up the doorknob from the porch, motioning for the other two to wait as he tossed it into the dark house.

The doorknob clattered onto the floor loudly in the hallway and rolled, Richie slowly tightening the grip on his knife. No sound responded to them and Richie crept into the house, switching his knife for his pistol.

He glanced back over his shoulder, straining his ears to check once more. “I think we’re clear. At least on this floor.”

“I’ll take upstairs. I’ll shout if there’s a problem.” Eddie said, taking his own pistol from the pocket of his hoodie and starting the ascent up the stairs.

Bill headed for the basement with the same plan in mind, careful as ever while he opened the door, the slow creak echoing through the hallway. Richie combed the rooms around him, finding the living

room, study, and the dining room to be empty before he headed for the kitchen.

Someone had *definitely* either raided this house or just hastily packed their things and left at some point; though he figured the latter was less likely with the state of the front door. Drawers had been pulled out and their contents were spilled onto the floor and cabinets were left wide open in every room.

They weren't going to find anything useful *here*.

A loud *thud* from the floor above filled Richie with dread and he was suddenly running back through the house; heart racing wildly. "Eddie!" He took the stairs two at a time, hand barely grasping the banister as he did and the dread increasing when there was no response. "Eds!"

Richie reached the top of the stairs, noting the closed door before spotting the open one down the hallway and breaking into a sprint.

"Look out!"

Eddie's warning had come too late.

Richie's feet had suddenly flown from under him; gun flying from his hand and skidding across the floor. It stopped short of the bed and Richie slammed face down onto the hard wooden floor right next to Eddie who seemed disorientated while rubbing at his ribcage.

Richie slowly pushed up enough to twist his body and sit up, facing the doorway to see what had tripped him, squinting to try and get a better look while blindly groping around for his glasses. In his haste to help Eddie, he hadn't noticed the wire that was tied carefully on the doorframe, acting as a trap of some kind.

"It's for zombies I think. There's one on the other door too." Eddie said, wincing and pressing a hand to his ribcage. "I told you to watch out."

"Me?" Richie asked, now using both hands to try and find his glasses. "What about *you*? How'd *you* get tripped?"

"I was walking backwards in case something came out one of the other rooms." Eddie muttered, spotting Richie's glasses across the room.

With a hiss, Eddie climbed to his feet and made his way over to them, wrapping an arm around his stomach as he bent to snag up the glasses. He crouched in front of Richie, carefully placing the glasses back onto his face with a smile. "There you go. Not blind anymore."

"Thanks Eds." Richie said, returning the smile. "Downside to the zombie apocalypse. I can't get my contacts anymore. I'm surprised the glasses survived this long."

Footsteps suddenly thudded on the stairs, followed by Bill's voice. "Richie! Eddie!"

"Bill be care –" Richie's warning died in his throat as Bill tripped and crashed into Eddie with a thud. Richie's hands shot out to catch Eddie as he landed on him, knocking the wind out of Richie in the process. "– ful. You know, as kinky as this is, guys, you're kinda crushing me and the bedframe does not feel good against my back."

"Sorry." Bill groaned and pushed himself up from the small pile they'd created on the ground. "What the fuck did I just – *oh*." His eyes had landed on the zombie tripper and he let out a nervous laugh. "At least it's effective?"

"Yeah on three idiots." Eddie huffed, planting his hands against Richie's shoulders and pushing himself up. "Not sure how it works on the dead."

Richie planted his arm onto the bed behind him and slowly pushed himself to his feet, snatching his pistol up in the process. "We are so lucky these didn't go off when we tripped."

"I didn't even think about that." Eddie said, returning his pistol to his hoodie pocket. "I was too busy trying to learn to breathe again after I hit the ground."

There was a laugh from Richie who was now studying the wall next to the bed. Whoever had lived here or put up the traps had taken a

marker to the wall, drawing a giant Z before keeping a tally record underneath.

Fifty.

“Christ.” Bill said, standing next to Richie and looking at the wall. “Is that how many they saw or how many they tripped?”

“I don’t know.” Richie said, looking at the room around them. The person had been covering most of the walls in graffiti before they left; as though it was their only way to keep hold of their sanity.

“Not a flu.” Eddie read, squinting at one of the walls. “Well they got that right. What flu could have caused this?”

Richie snorted. “There was a lot on the news about how it was a new strain of influenza. They were calling it influenza z –”

“How the fuck do you –”

“– which means they knew what it was doing to people from the start.”

The flashlight dropped from Eddie’s hand. “*What?*”

“Are you fucking serious?” Bill asked. “This sounds like a cons–”

“My dad’s part of the CDC.” Richie said, cutting Bill off. “I didn’t believe what I was hearing at the start of the outbreak but my dad wouldn’t lie. He was calling it Influenza Z when he was doing the blood tests on me and Stan. Do you know they separated people in the evacuation camps? They had two categories. You were either a carrier or doomed to die. I never found out our results before the place was overrun but they think carriers are the key to the cure. My dad’s a carrier. When the infection hit the camp, he was one of the first people they got onto a helicopter.”

“To take him to the CDC.” Eddie realised.

“Yeah. He’ll either be here or somewhere else. Let’s go. The others will be getting worried.”

Bill nodded and they re-grouped outside the house where Georgie was looking at them with nothing short of concern, looking around them towards the house they'd just emerged from.

"What happened in there? We heard bangs and shouts but mom said that we didn't need four people tripping over each other in a house."

"There were some zombie traps." Bill said, straightening the sniper on his back. "We kinda... all fell over it."

Stan snorted. "How did three of you fall over the *same* trap?"

"Because we warned each other too late." Richie grumbled, shoving his pistol back into its holster. "This house is a no go. Traps. No door. It's not safe."

"The one we checked was clear. We can fortify it for one night." Beverly said.

Bill nodded. "Okay, you guys start on that. I'm gonna take Georgie, Richie and Eddie into the main part of town and see if we can find food other than soup."

"Be careful. Radio us if there's a problem or when you get back. We'll move the cars over to the house."

The centre of town was no different to the rest of Hawkins; abandoned cars and litter scattered everywhere. Richie hopped over an abandoned suitcase near one of the cars as they made their way through the mess, pausing to take a look around the street before his attention locked onto the movie theatre across the street from them.

"Is there something wrong?" Eddie asked.

Richie tore his gaze from the theatre with a grin. "Nope. I'm just keeping an eye out."

He could have sworn he'd seen someone moving around, and the last time he'd checked, zombies didn't duck for cover when they were spotted.

"Do you hear that?" Bill asked stopping suddenly.

Richie strained his ears to listen, his insides freezing. It was sobbing. It sounded like every negative emotion in the world was being poured into it. The rounded the corner carefully, spotting the zombie sitting in the doorway of the store.

“It’s just a zombie right?” Georgie asked. “So you can just shoot it in the head?”

Richie shook his head. “That’s a crier. You can’t get close enough.”

“I can do it with the sniper.” Bill said.

“It moves too fast, look at it.” Eddie hissed.

The zombie was rocking back and forth like it was trying to sooth itself, and Bill took careful note on the fast paced swaying. There was no way he could get a lock on it.

“We should find another way in.” Richie said.

“Right – yeah.” Bill said, taking a step back.

His foot cause a discarded can and a *clink* echoed through the street. The crier stopped, her head angling towards them. With a snarl, she started to rise, her gaze attached to them the entire time.

“Oh shit – fuck – *run*.”

The crier let out a fierce shriek.

And then it was running.

Georgie was ahead of the group, weaving in and out of scattered items on the street. Richie jumped them, attempting to keep up with the younger member of their group. When Georgie ducked into an alleyway, Richie followed. Bill turned sharply and swung out his sniper, the butt of the gun smacking into the crier’s face. The crier stumbled and snarled, but Bill had already turned the sniper around and fired.

“Georgie, stop!” Richie shouted as the snarls came to a stop. “It’s dead!”

Georgie dashed across the street into another alleyway and Richie groaned, pushing himself to try and keep up. He had to get to Georgie before something happened to him. Had to get him back to the group. Had to –

The sound of a screech echoed through the street seconds before a car smashed into Richie. His body hit the hood before dropping to the ground, and Eddie felt the panic rising in him.

“Rich–”

Something slammed into Eddie, pinning him to the ground. He chanced a look over his shoulder, only seeing half a face since his attacker was wearing a bandanna over the lower half, a spiked bat attached to their back. The person moved his hand to their mouth in a shushing motion.

“Don’t move!” A woman hissed, pointing her gun at Bill.

“Holy fucking shit, Patrick!”

Eddie’s attention turned back to ahead of them where two men had gotten out of the car, the blonde nudging Richie with the tip of his foot.

“You hit him pretty hard. Looks like he’s still alive though.”

“Good. I can’t be bothered to chase the other brat down.” Patrick said, stepping over to the barely moving Richie. “I don’t think he’s from that group of brats though, Vic.”

“Doesn’t matter. Let’s get him back.” Vic dragged the barely conscious Richie towards the car. “Don’t forget his stuff.”

Patrick bent to pick up the glasses and backpack, opening the trunk and tossing them inside while Vic haphazardly tossed Richie into the backseat of the car.

“Let’s go before the zombies show up.” Patrick called.

They climbed into the car, Patrick throwing it into gear before taking off.

The person who pinned Eddie slowly stood, removing a radio from their belt. “Did you do it Max?”

“Yeah I got the tracker under the car. Lucas will find out where they’re going.”

“Good.” The stranger shifted, holding out a gloved hand out to Eddie. “Sorry. I couldn’t let you go exposing yourself to those guys.”

“But they could take Richie?” Eddie snapped, refusing the help and climbing to his feet. “You *let* them take him!”

“We didn’t have a choice.” The woman said, slowly lowering her gun. “They took some of our friends too. Steve are you *sure* this will work?”

“Lucas hasn’t let us down yet. *Trust him*. We’re gonna find them. You two need to come with us to the hospital. We’ll explain everything there.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Did I base the end of this chapter off a walking dead episode?

Yes. Yes I did.

12. Chapter 12

Summary for the Chapter:

Did I just bring you a Richie only chapter? You better believe it!

Pain was the first thing that registered to Richie when he woke up.

Through his blurry vision, he could only make out white, and the soft sound of beeping reaching his ears. The bed he found himself in was less than comfortable; reminding him of the kind of bed that was usually found in a hospital. Slowly, he tilted his head to the side to try and figure out where he was, meeting the blurry outline of his glasses on a nightstand.

Riche slowly sat up, wincing as his body protested to the sudden movement. He reached out, grabbing his glasses and shoving them on he could see his surroundings better. It *looked* like a hospital room but there were no windows, just a single camera in the corner with a flashing green light under the lens. Carefully, he swung his legs over the side of the bed, catching himself in the mirror on the back of the door.

He looked a mess.

His hair was dishevelled and someone had changed his clothes into a pair of hospital pyjamas, though they'd left the shirt unbuttoned which left his bandaged torso on display. There was a yellowing mark along his jaw and a stitched up cut across his nose, but Richie couldn't remember just *what* had happened for him to be like this or even in this place.

The door opened and a woman dressed in a long white lab coat wandered in, Vic at her heels with a gun strapped to his waist.

"You're awake. That's good. I was getting worried. It's been three days since Vic and Patrick brought you in." The woman said, grabbing a chart from the bottom of the bed. Vic didn't move from by the door, almost as if he was acting like a barricade. "I'm Doctor

Maxwell and I've been taking care of you. You seem to be recovering well, Richie. Some bruising, a couple of cuts, and a couple of broken ribs but you're okay. It could have been worse."

"What ha – how do you know my name?" Richie asked warily.

"The driving license in your wallet." Doctor Maxwell replied, flipping the sheet up on the clipboard. "We can't do anything for a broken rib, unfortunately. You'll have to wait for those to heal on your own."

"So what happened?"

"You don't remember?" Doctor Maxwell furrowed her brow. "Nothing at all?"

"I remember him." Richie said, nodding his head at Vic. "I remember he dragged me into a car."

"Yes. We send people out to look for survivors. Vic said you came running out of an alleyway and Patrick hit you with the car. They felt it was only right to bring you back here for treatment. Your things are in the drawers over there but we can't let you walk around with a gun or a knife so we had to take those off you until you're healed and can leave."

Richie didn't miss the way Vic shifted uncomfortably at the mention of leaving, but the Doctor didn't seem to notice as she noted something down onto the clipboard and returned it to the bottom of the bed.

"Well, come on. It's time for me to show you who you'll be reporting to. Everyone has someone they report to. Everyone works for their meals and a bed. We used valuable resources on you and you have to work off that debt. You'll have to come like that for now. Your clothes are in the process of being washed and will be returned to you later."

"Right." Richie said unsurely, slipping his feet into his shoes which they'd fortunately left by the bed for him.

Doctor Maxwell led him from the room, and Richie noted instantly how this place looked like some kind of underground hospital ward.

The elevators at the end were guarded by two men with guns; a red flag.

If people were allowed to leave, why would they need an armed guard?

Richie was led to an office where a woman was making down notes on something, food barely touched on her tray. Doctor Maxwell sighed and raised her hand, knocking on the door. The woman jerked from surprise and looked up, brow furrowing in confusion.

"This is Richie." Doctor Maxwell said. "The patient from room twenty. He'll be your ward. Richie, this is Lucille. You'll be reporting to her every morning and doing whatever she needs you to until she dismisses you to sleep. You can start now. I have to report to Doctor Grey."

"Well, come in, take a seat." Lucille said, waving to the chair across the desk from her as Doctor Maxwell left. "I don't bite, Richie."

Richie slowly walked across the room and took a seat, his muscles relaxing now that he wasn't moving around. "She didn't call you a doctor."

"I'm not a doctor." Lucille said, looking back down at her work. "Not officially. I came here as intern and then the outbreak hit and there aren't many doctors left." Glancing back up, she saw his gaze had settled on the tub of pills on her desk labelled as *Zirifran*. "I'm a carrier. They tell me you are too."

"What –"

"They did a blood test when you came in. It turns out that you're a carrier. They should be giving you this medication pretty soon."

"I don't want it."

"You do."

"Not if I have to work it off."

Lucille frowned as she considered what she was about to say. "You

have somewhere you need to be, Richie? It's dangerous out there."

"I have friends."

"You have survival buddies. They're not friends. They're not family. You're the son of Doctor Tozier. I imagine they'll ship you out soon to Atlanta."

"You know my dad?"

"He was here while the helicopter refuelled, and then he left. Doctor Grey promised to ship you out if we ever found you."

"After I pay my debt." Richie hissed, almost venomously.

"No. Whenever they can send a helicopter to get you."

"I won't leave. Not without my friends."

"An attitude like that can get you in trouble with the other people here, Richie." Lucille said, placing her pen down, glancing behind him as though checking for something. "Keep your head down and don't do anything stupid. I have your first job for you." She pointed to a basket at the side of the room that was filled with clothes. "Take that to the laundry for me. I haven't had time to do it yet. It's just around the corner."

Richie stood slowly, carefully grabbing the basket and heading from the room. The door to the laundry room was wide open, and there was a girl a couple of years younger than him folding clothes and putting them into a basket. Unsure of whether or not he could just walk in, Richie raised his hand and knocked on the door.

The girl jumped and turned to face him, short brown curly hair falling over her shoulders. "Oh, you're the new guy, right? I'm Jane, laundry girl of the year!"

"Richie. Lucille sent me."

Jane smiled. "Lucille's nice. I like Lucille."

"Are you saying the others –"

“Bad people.” Jane clarified. “You can come in. Put the basket over there on the shelf and put a note on top of it with Lucille’s name. It makes it easier for me when people come back to collect things for themselves or the people they work for.”

Richie approached the shelf and placed the basket onto it, grabbing the notepad at the end of the shelf and scrawling Lucille’s name onto the page before tearing it off and dropping it onto the pile of clothes; but not before taking spotting the pills next to the notepad.

Zirifran.

“You’re a carrier like Lucille?”

“That’s what they say.” Jane said, returning to folding clothes. “So how did you end up here Richie?”

“One of them accidentally hit me with a car or something.”

Jane paused in the middle of folding a shirt. “Huh, same here. That’s how my friends got here too. Oh, while you’re here...” She dropped the freshly folded shirt into a basket before picking it up and holding it out to him. “These are yours. Come back in three hours for Lucille’s.”

“Right. Thanks.” Richie said, taking the basket from her and leaving the laundry room.

He returned to his room and placed the basket on top of the drawers, spotting a tub of pills on top of them with *Zirifran* printed across the label. He couldn’t be a carrier. He’d shared bottles of water with other people and they hadn’t turned.

Carriers spread the virus.

“Hey.”

Richie turned sharply to face his door, spotting a boy a couple of years younger than him with a pile of hospital scrubs clutched to his chest. “Hey.”

“Doctor Maxwell asked me to bring you these.” The boy said holding

the clothes out. "I'm one of her wards – Will."

"Uh, Richie." Richie reached out and took the scrubs from Will carefully. "Why did she want me to have these? I have my own clothes."

"You have one set of clothes. These are spares for when yours are being washed." Will looked around Richie for a moment, brow furrowing. "You're a carrier too?"

"I guess. That's what Lucille told me."

"They said that about me and Jane too. They say it about everyone. They said they throw the non-carriers back out but... I've never seen a person come in through that elevator and leave except for the same four people."

"Will!" A voice called from down the hall and Will flinched.

"I have to go." Will said, backing out of the room. "I'll see you around Richie."

Will was gone, leaving Richie alone in the room. He put the scrubs and his freshly cleaned clothes away hastily before making his way back to Lucille's office. Lucille looked up from the folder on her desk at his approaching footsteps, offering him a smile.

"I didn't intend for you to come running back. You're still healing." Lucille said, returning her attention back to the folder. "I don't... really have anything else for you to do right now."

"That's okay." Richie tugged at the hem of his shirt awkwardly. "It's... better than being in a room with a camera in the corner watching everything I do."

Lucille nodded, picking up her pen and writing something down. "Indeed it is. All of the patient rooms have them."

Richie didn't like the sound of that. He stepped into the room and took the seat across from Lucille again. "Can I... ask you something?" Lucille hummed in response. "I... I noticed that everyone I've run into is on Zirifran in here."

“Did you now?” Lucille asked idly, turning a page in her folder.

“Yeah, and, I find it weird that they all happen to be carriers, and all ended up in this place in the same way.”

“Do you now?” Lucille wrote something down and closed the folder, pushing it over the desk towards him. “Can you take that to the file room for me? I’m done with it.”

“Lucille –”

“You know it’s interesting, Richie, that there are no cameras in the hallways and stairwells and yet I’m expected to trust you with this *confidential* information without a watchful gaze. The file room is two floors down and the stairwell is three hallways over.”

Richie reached over and took the folder with a frustrated sigh, climbing to his feet and leaving the room. It was only when he was a few feet away from the stairwell that he realised what Lucille had said.

She *wanted* him to look at the file. Ducking into the stairwell quickly, Richie looked down at the folder in his hands.

Mike Wheeler.

He flicked it open. There was no picture for the file, but they were marked as deceased due to infection. Richie scanned over the pages quickly. *Car accident... broken arm... Zirifran...*

His fingers tightened on the edges of the folder, looking over the bottom half of the first page.

Week one: Subject has responded well to the Zirifran. No signs of infection.

Week two: Subject has become sick.

Week three: Subject is exhibiting zombie like behaviour but still has humanity.

Week four: Subject is sick again.

Week five: Subject could no longer handle the effects of Zirifran.

Week six: Subject has been terminated.

A door below opened and Richie hastily closed the file and tucked it under his arm before he began the descent down the stairs. He passed a doctor who nodded in greeted, rushing down the two flights of stairs to the floor where the file room was.

It was mostly empty of people aside from the odd armed guard outside one of the rooms. A snarl sounded from in one of the rooms, followed by a gunshot and Richie picked up the pace, finding the door marked *File Room* before ducking inside.

The room was empty so Richie made his way quickly over to the filing cabinets before opening a drawer marked with a 'W' and shoving the file where it needed to go.

And then he was opening the drawer marked with a 'T' and hunting out his own file.

Richie Tozier.

Car accident... minor scrapes... two broken ribs. Subject has yet to start his Zirifran trial.

He shoved it back in the drawer and began to hunt through the others, finding a file marked *Jane Hopper*.

Car accident... broken leg...

There was a whole two months' worth of her progress in regards to the Zirifran drug trial; all positive, and the horrible realisation sank in.

Zirifran wasn't for carriers. It turned people *into* carriers.

Richie shoved the folder back into the cabinet and slammed it shut before he left the room and rushed back up the hallway and back into the stairwell, taking in a few deep breaths.

They were experimenting on humans with whatever caused the

outbreak.

That's why this Mike person had died.

"Richie? Are you okay?"

Richie looked up to see Doctor Maxwell halfway up the stairs, and it was only now he saw how fake her concerned smile was.

"I uh – I over did it. Walked too much. Lucille told me to take it easy but I didn't think stairs would cause my downfall." Richie lied.

Doctor Maxwell nodded. "You should report to Lucille and tell her you need to go and rest for a while as you're still in recovery. I'll have Will bring something to your room for the pain once I've returned this file."

Richie nodded and ascended the stairs, squeezing by Doctor Maxwell in the narrow stairwell. As he passed her, he caught the name on the folder, his throat constricting.

Will Byers.

They weren't just wards. They were lab rats. And the people they reported to were their observers.

13. Chapter 13

Summary for the Chapter:

Had to get this out for you guys now since I'll be away most of tomorrow so I hope this will tie you over until the next chapter!

"Christ Stan, how did you make it all the fucking way up here?" Bill panted, standing in the doorway of the fire escape that led to the hospital roof.

Stan was sitting just ahead of him, legs dangling over the edge of the roof. He looked back over his shoulder at Bill's voice, shoulders rolling into a shrug. "I was determined I guess."

Bill sighed and crossed the space between them, carefully sitting next to Stan and dangling his own legs over the edge. "Are you still worrying about Richie?"

"Richie has a way of getting himself into trouble. I'd worry about him even if he was here with us." Stan said, leaning back and placing his hands onto the roof to support him. "I'm starting to think he just does it for fun. So did you find –"

"No."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't... I just don't want to think about it right now. Mom's out there with some people looking for him." Bill pressed his hands to the edge of the roof, looking out at the parts of the town they could see from their current location. "So why did you come up here?"

Stan raised a hand and tapped something between them, drawing Bill's attention to it. It was the scope that Richie usually wore around his neck. He'd handed it to Stan when they'd left the motel saying it needed to go back to its rightful owner; mostly because whenever he had to run somewhere 'the damn thing kept hitting him in the chest'.

"Before this, the zombies I mean, I liked to watch birds. I used to do

it with my dad when I was a kid and I didn't stop just because I grew up. It became a hobby. Something that relaxed me when I was anxious. I had so many bird books in my bedroom back at the apartment and Richie used to make fun of me for it but... it was the only real piece of home I'd decided to take with me when I moved to Nouvelle for college."

"So how'd you end up living with Richie?"

Stan snorted, moving his hand back to the roof. "We met in college. We were roommates in our first year there and Richie was like *hey when we finish this year we should get an apartment together*. No one could really handle Richie like I could and... he was the first person to understand my obsessive compulsion to be clean *all* the time and *didn't* make fun of it."

"You're not clean now." Bill pointed out, a grin forming on his face as he raised his hand to Stan's face and wiped a single finger across his cheek where a mixture of sweat and dirt had accumulated. "You're actually pretty grimy."

Stan shoved him away lightly. "Have you ever tried showering with a broken ankle? It's *hard*, Bill."

Bill chuckled, slowly standing and holding his hand out. "Come on. I'll help you."

"Bill –"

"I'm just helping you to take a shower Stan." Bill said. "Richie's done it before right? It's no different."

Stan sighed, snagging the scope up and hooking it back around his neck before taking Bill's hand. Bill pulled him to his feet carefully, one arm wrapped around Stan to keep him steady. They crossed the roof and descended the stairwell back to the fourth floor, ducking into the semi-private ward they were sharing.

Bill was careful when he removed the brace from Stan's foot, unwrapping the bandages with surprising finesse while commenting on how they'd need to get cleaner ones and letting the splints to fall

onto the floor. Bill's arm made its way back around Stan's waist and he hoisted him up; almost perching him like a bird on his hip.

"This is really weird." Stan said as Bill carried him into the ward's bathroom.

"It's necessary with your ankle the way it is." Bill said, nudging the toilet lid down with his knee before sitting Stan on it. "See, that wasn't so bad."

"Yet." Stan muttered. "I don't recall *liking* it when Richie had to help me out. At least the motel had a bath."

"Well this place doesn't." Bill said, grabbing the hem of Stan's shirt. "Arms up."

"I'm not a child!" Stan groaned. "I can remove my own clothes!" Bill moved his hands and Stan peeled the shirt off. "Please tell me we have clean stuff for after this."

"We do. Beverly found a laundry room and everything is nice and clean. If it makes you more comfortable you can always leave the boxers on."

"Don't be fucking gross. Let's just get this over with."

"Uh – should I ask?" Eddie's voice called from inside the main room.

Bill grinned and leaned out of the bathroom. "I'm helping Stan take shower. You need something?"

Eddie scrunched up his nose. "I was going to ask if you needed me to bring you any food from the cafeteria but I can see you're busy."

"We'll get something after. Hey did they –"

Eddie frowned, shaking his head. "Not yet. Lucas said he has a lead but he wants to keep an eye on it to make sure."

"We'll get him back, Eddie."

"We better. It's too quiet in this group without him."

“Yeah *that’s* why you want him back so badly.” Stan called.

“Shut the fuck up Stan!”

Bill chuckled. “Hey Eddie? Can you get us some clean bandages for Stan’s ankle?”

“Yeah, sure thing. I’ll find them now so they’re here when you’re done... doing whatever.”

“*Showering.*” Stan shouted, voice echoing around the bathroom.

“Yeah for now.” Eddie called back, turning on his heel and leaving the room, making sure to close the door behind him while Bill ducked back into the bathroom and kneed the door shut.

“This is extremely awkward.” Stan said while Bill started to yank his shirt over his head.

“Just, I don’t know, close your eyes?” Bill suggested, moving his hands to his belt. “You don’t like being dirty right? This is the only way you can do this because you’re gonna need the support to stand _”

Bill had stopped, and Stan realised that his attention had zeroed in on his torso. Stan knew *exactly* what he was staring at; the long scratch marks that trailed from his shoulder down to his collar bones as though someone had dragged their nails down his skin.

“It was the Runner that broke my ankle.” Stan said, shifting awkwardly on his seat. “When it pulled me off the fence it started clawing at my shoulders to keep me pinned before Richie was back over the fence and ragging it away from me. Richie cleaned them up the best he could but... they were pretty deep.”

“You two really *did* go through hell, didn’t you?”

Stan laughed; the sound bitter. “You have no idea. Can I get clean now?”

“Right – yeah – clean.” Bill said, returning to his task of undressing.

Showering, as it turned out, was difficult in a small cubicle with two adult sized people. Stan was forced to keep one arm wrapped securely around Bill's neck to keep him upright while also trying to awkwardly clean himself of the grime and dirt that had accumulated onto his body over the last few days. Bill had ended up taking the cloth from him, instructing Stan to keep a grip on his shoulders as he set to work on scrubbing the grime away; taking extra care around his scratches.

Stan had to admire that Bill stayed focused on nothing but the task; attention fixed only on washing away the grime.

Once they were sufficiently cleaned, Bill helped Stan back out of the shower and grabbed a towel which he handed over to the other man before grabbing another one for himself. He placed Stan back onto the toilet once he was sure he'd secured the towel around his waist, leaving the room to grab him some fresh clothes.

There was a fresh pile of bandages on Bill's bed that Eddie had brought back to the room, and the splints and foot brace were lying next to them instead of on the floor where they'd left them. Bill returned to the bathroom, dropping a pile of clothes onto Stan's lap.

"I'll let you have some privacy now. I'll come back and get you in a moment."

Stan nodded and Bill left the room. With some minor difficulty Stan was able to pull on the fresh clothes, slowly pushing himself up when he was dressed and limping carefully out of the bathroom. Bill was finishing up with fastening his belt, looking up he caught sight of Stan's legs when they appeared in the doorway.

"I told you I'd come back and get you."

Stan smiled, leaning against the doorframe. "If you don't let me walk on my own once in a while I'm never gonna heal up, Bill."

Bill returned the smile, shaking his head in mild amusement. "Yeah, okay. Well, come over here so I can put the brace back on. You're not healed fully yet."

Stan limped over to the bed and slowly lowered himself to sit. Bill carefully grabbed his leg and pulled it onto the bed, rolling up the leg of the sweats he was wearing and looking over his ankle. It looked nothing like the first night he'd taken Stan and Richie to the farm when it was painfully swollen. It looked... almost back to normal.

"You know, you might not need the splints on your ankle anymore. I mean you made it over here without help and it doesn't *look* as bad as it was." Bill said, carefully pressing his fingers against Stan's ankle. "Does that hurt at all?"

Stan winced and Bill moved his hands away quickly. "It only hurt a little bit."

"I'm still not sure if you need the splints anymore since we're not *completely* sure how long ago you broke it."

"I'm still limping though." Stan pointed out.

"Yeah..." Bill furrowed his brow. "Are you *sure* you broke it five weeks ago, though?"

Stan let out a soft sigh, shoulders rolling into a shrug. "I don't know. Maybe? It could have been a little longer. It's hard to keep track of time these days."

Bill straightened, holding out his hands. "Come here, let's get you on your feet." Stan took his hands and Bill pulled him to feet. "Now put some weight onto your foot. Not too much though. I don't think I can catch you in time if you crumple like paper."

Stan let out a laugh, carefully placing his foot flat onto the ground. There was a dull throbbing present from the sudden weight, though it wasn't as bad as it had been while he'd still been on the road with Richie.

"Huh..." Bill hummed, slowly releasing Stan. Stan wobbled and reached out quickly, grabbing Bill's arm to keep himself up. Bill let out a soft chuckle, his hand wrapping around Stan's arm to support him. "Okay so you're not ready to stand up without something to keep you up. At least you're able to walk without help for a while."

Stan groaned. "Yeah but I always have to make sure I stop next to a person or something I can prop myself up on. It's *annoying*."

"Well, that's okay." Bill said, his grip tightening on Stan's arm as he teetered on the spot, his free hand coming to rest on Stan's shoulder. "I'll be your crutch."

Stan looked up at him, the frustration clean in his eyes. He hated not being able to stand without help from one of the others. It made him feel so damn weak and he hated it. Bill hated that look. Stan was frustrated with himself.

Frustrated because he got hurt.

Frustrated because he had to rely on the group around him.

"Thanks Bill. I hate this whole situation but..." Stan paused for a moment, a thoughtful look coming to his face before he released a soft sigh. "You've been making it easier."

Bill hummed with a soft smile. "You know... Richie told me something interesting at the motel when everyone was packing up."

"Why do I feel this is bad?"

Bill was still smiling. "He told me he can count on one hand the amount of people you've willingly let touch you when it wasn't... necessary."

"Oh my –"

"Your mom. Richie. Richie's mom. Georgie. *Me*. You didn't like it when Mike lifted you into the truck. You panicked when you woke up to Beverly using you as a pillow. I saw how you tensed up. You don't do that around me. You were a little tense when Georgie was getting you to the truck on the farm, but not as much as any other time."

"You just give off this really comforting –"

"Nope. I don't think that's it." Bill said, cutting Stan off and stepping closer. "In the motel, you actually moved across the bed to cling to

me. Now why would you do that?”

Stan glared up at him. “Now you’re just fucking with me, Bill! You already know why and now you’re just trying to drag it –”

Stan’s words died into a surprised sound as Bill surged forward and connected his mouth to Stan’s. Stan wobbled dangerously but Bill moved fast, his hands gripping at Stan’s waist.

“Yeah. You’re kinda fun to fuck with.” Bill muttered against his mouth. “Wanted to do that for a while. The kiss, I mean. Not the teasing.”

“The hell was stopping you?”

“You were doped up on pain medication a lot, Stan. I wasn’t going to do it when you weren’t level headed. But now...” Bill drummed a finger lightly against Stan’s waist. “You’re not doped up so I can do it.”

Bill moved back in, and this time Stan was ready.

“Gross. Get a room guys.” Beverly’s voice drifted from the doorway, forcing them to pull apart.

“You know how to ruin a mood, Bev.” Bill said, looking over to where she was standing; her arms folded and a smile on her face. “Did you need something or were just trying to ruin my fun?”

Beverly’s smile turned into a grin. “We found them.”

14. Chapter 14

Summary for the Chapter:

I apologise for this chapter taking too long to get out. I've had a busy weekend with the wedding I attended and pride today but I finally managed to sit down and finish it and I'm already working on the next one so we should be back on track with the daily updates!

It had been four days since Richie had woken up in the strange underground hospital. He'd refused to take the Zirifran, but knowing that he was being watched by the camera in the corner of his room constantly meant that he had to pop the capsules in his mouth every morning and evening before heading into the bathroom and spitting them into the toilet.

He didn't trust this place, and he didn't trust Zirifran.

On the fifth day, there was something wrong. Richie had woken up feeling weird, rushing to the bathroom to empty the contents of his stomach, but that wasn't the only issue he was having. His entire body felt like it was burning, hands shaking as he reached for the lever on the toilet to flush the vomit away.

Richie had never been sick in his life.

Something was wrong.

He found himself bending over the toilet again as his stomach lurched, sinking to his knees as he emptied whatever was left into the toilet, slumping forward over the seat to rest his head against the cool porcelain. It eased the burning feeling a little, at least.

And that was where Lucille found him. She'd been concerned when he hadn't shown up to her office that morning, and rather than reporting the tardiness to Doctor Maxwell, she had taken the walk to Richie's room.

“Richie?” Lucille asked tentatively as she crouched next to him, placing a hand to his back. “Can you hear me?”

Richie groaned, his eyes flicking up to look at Lucille. “Somethin’ wrong...”

“I know sweetie.” Lucille said, rubbing a soothing circle against the back of the shirt that was sticking to his body. “Do you think you can get up? We need you to get back into bed.” Richie shook his head. “Okay, wait right there.”

Lucille rushed from the room, only to return a few minutes later with Vic who lingered back in the doorway for a moment as he studied Richie, taking in his current state. His body tensed and he inhaled sharply, his nose scrunching ever so slightly. His smell had changed drastically, almost like –

“I need you to help me get him back into bed.” Lucille said, looking over to Vic as she grabbed one of Richie’s sweat covered arms.

Vic nodded and stepped across the bathroom quickly, grabbing his other arm and helping Lucille to pull him up. “It’s Zirifran.”

“It can’t be.” Lucille said, heaving Richie across the bathroom and back into his room. “He hasn’t been taking it. He told me he wasn’t.”

“I know.” Vic looked over to Lucille as they sat Richie onto the bed, nodding his head discreetly at the camera. “*He* knows too. He had Doctor Maxwell give him the liquid version.”

Lucille frowned, lying Richie down and pulling the blanket over him. “We can’t keep doing this, Vic. We have to get them out as soon as possible. The liquid version is *too* dangerous. I *told* them it was when they were giving it to Mike.”

Vic seemed uneasy for a moment. “How soon do we have to do this?”

“We need to do it tomorrow when he sends Henry and Patrick out.”

“But the guards –”

“I’ll take care of that.” Lucille said, grabbing a bedpan from the

nightstand as Riche heaved, shoving it into his hands. “You just have to get them out of the building. Jane said her friends are at the hospital. She can direct you there, and you can get them there without anything happening to them. I *know* you can.”

“Not without you I can’t.” Vic hissed, leaning over the bed towards Lucille. “Just me and three people, one of which is sick? I can’t do that alone. I can’t protect them *and* drag a sick person around with me, Lucille.”

Lucille reached over and cupped at Vic’s cheek. “You *can*. I know you can.”

“What about you? You can’t stay here.”

“I *have* to stay here Vic. I *need* to get in contact with Jess in Atlanta. I have to give her everything I have on Zirifran. I have to tell her – she has to know what it does. Just look at him Vic. Look at the state of him.”

Vic looked down at Richie who had just vomited a green sludge into the bedpan. “Okay – yeah – and you’re sure he’s not gonna – she injected him with a lot of that stuff. Four doses from a needle every night. That’s... that’s more than she put in me. I can *smell* how different he is, Lucille. He smells the same as Henry does.”

“He’s *not* Henry, Vic.” Lucille said, her expression nothing short of sympathetic. “It won’t turn out like it did with him. Not if we get him out of here.”

“What about the withdrawal? If he’s suddenly not on this stuff after being on it constantly –”

“I’ll leave you some pills to take with you. You can help him ween off the Zirifran, but you have to tell him what’s going on with him. He needs to know that much. We owe him that. You’re the only person who knows as much about this as I do. And Vic? When you get out of here... don’t come back for me. Stay out there and *live*.”

Vic flinched. Over the year he’d spent in this place against his will, Lucille had become a sort of mother to him. She was always doing

what was in his best interest to keep him safe; especially where Henry was concerned. She was the reason *he* wasn't loaded up on the liquid Zirifran and barely aware of his surroundings.

She protected people in this place the best she could, and in return he helped her plan to get some of the patients out. She wanted him to leave her here but he *couldn't*. How could she expect him to do that? But he had to; and he knew that. There would be limited chances for them to get the three of them out.

Vic bit at his lip, worry evident on his face. "Doctor Grey will send *them* after us when he realises we're gone. You know that."

Lucille smiled. "You'll be safe by then. I'll hold them off from realising what's going on as long as I can. Just don't forget his stuff when you leave."

Eddie hated waiting.

They knew exactly where to go, but coming up with a plan was necessary if they were going to break into a government building that was still in use. It didn't make it less frustrating, and when Eddie caught Stan's eye, he could tell *he* hated it too. They just wanted to get their friend back where he would be *safe*.

"If they're keeping all but a select few people in the building at all times, they must be either working with a key card system or... guards." Lucas said, his face twisting into a grimace. "Both are fucking annoying."

"We have me for that." Max said from her place stretched across three plush seats of the hospital day room.

"No Max, you gotta stay here and be our eyes out there." Lucas said, tapping away at something on his laptop. "Just in case there are surprises outside. I don't see any guards anywhere outside the building..."

"Inside maybe? It's a CDC building." Nancy said, chewing at her bottom lip. "Why keep guards outside when you can have them inside a fortified building. Can you get into their security cameras?"

The place obviously still has power like we do.”

“You’re not talking about me just getting into some cameras. This is *government* security. It’s gonna be harder and – *what the hell is this?*”

“What?” Max asked, sitting up suddenly.

“I somehow ended up in a computer that belongs to a Doctor R. Grey instead of the cameras...” Lucas furrowed his brow, staring at the screen. “And... there’s... well there are some patient files here for a lot of people... and Richie’s is the last one they updated.”

Stan’s head shot away from Eddie to Lucas. “*What?* What’s it say?”

“Hold on, I’m getting into the file just give me a moment! Okay let’s see. Patient was brought in by Victor Criss and Patrick Hockstetter after an automobile accident... patient has slight bruising... few scrapes... broken ribs. Patient is conscious as of five days ago... patient is *healing* nicely thanks to the Zirifran he was given on arrival to keep him stable... patient refuses to *take* Zirifran in its pill form... patient is taking liquid Zirifran... Zirifran?”

“What the hell is Zirifran?” Beverly asked, concern clear on her face.

“I don’t know. There’s nothing here on Zirifran... and there’s nothing in Richie’s file to tell us what it’s doing to him. I don’t like this. We have to get them *now*. We can’t keep waiting. We’re gonna need a couple of you to come with us, too. We don’t know what state he’s going to be in and he might not respond well to strangers.”

“I’ll go.” Eddie said, shooting a glance to Stan. “You *can’t*. We don’t know what that place is like.”

“I’ll go too.” Bill gave Stan’s hand a gentle squeeze. “I’ll bring him back Stan. I promise.”

Stan nodded. “I know you will.”

When morning came, Vic shouldered the duffle bag Lucille had stashed into his closet and rushed down the hallways, ducking into Richie’s room. The light under the lens of the camera, usually a bright flashing green, was currently red and unblinking. Lucille had

done her part, and Vic had to do his. He opened the drawers where Richie's clothes were kept, shoving them into the duffle bag quickly.

"Vic, are you sure about this?" Jane asked, emerging from Richie's bathroom with close behind. "What if –"

"Nothing is going to happen." Vic said, holding the duffle bag out to Jane. "I'm gonna get you out of here; all of you."

Jane took the bag and pulled the strap of her shoulder, still seeming wary. Vic made for the bed, grabbing one of Richie's arms and pulling it around his neck. The Zirifran was still strong in his system, and Richie didn't respond much beyond a groan as he tried to stand upright on his own once Vic had managed to get him onto his feet.

"No, no." Vic placed a hand to Richie's chest, keeping him upright. "You need to just... let me support you, okay?" Richie nodded, and Vic grabbed his leg, carefully lifting it to slip his foot into one of his shoes before doing the other. "There we go. Okay, come on. It's time to get out of here. Will, grab his other arm."

They left the room, Jane ahead of them with the duffle bag firmly over her shoulder; Vic and Will trying to support a barely responsive Richie between them. The guards that usually paced back and forth in front of the elevators were gone, making it easy for them to slip inside, Vic slamming his finger onto the button to close the doors.

Richie sank to the floor of the elevator when Vic leaned him against the wall, his body shaking as he closed his eyes. "S'cold."

"Shit." Vic crouched in front of Richie, tapping his fingers lightly against his cheek. "Richie. I need you to stay awake, okay? If you fall to sleep you're gonna be deadweight and we won't be able to keep you up."

"At least he's more aware." Jane said, staring at the bright red numbers on the panel that told them what floor they were on. "More than he's been the last couple of days."

"Yeah but it's not enough." Vic said, pulling off his jacket and working on slipping Richie's arms into the sleeves with Will's help.

“This is the best we can do right now. You feeling better?”

“Lil’ bit.” Richie’s voice was slurred, but he definitely sounded better than he had the day before.

“Almost there.” Jane said, still staring at the red numbers.

“Come on Richie, up you get.” Vic pulled Richie’s arm back around his neck and Richie clumsily climbed to his feet with some help from both Vic and Will who once again supported him between them.

A ding sounded as they reached the ground floor of the building. The click of gun reached his ears as the doors slowly opened and Vic felt his heart slow down. Someone had been waiting them? Patrick and Henry weren’t supposed to come back until nightfall.

“Richie!”

Notes for the Chapter:

Before anyone like, comes at me with this Vic thing. I'm gonna quickly say that I always felt that he was never THAT bad, and he could have easily had a chance to turn into a good person if he was given the chance, so that's what we're doing here and I will go into some more details on the hows/whys etc as the story progresses!

15. Chapter 15

Summary for the Chapter:

I didn't get chance to proof read this since I'm busy celebrating my spawning day but I wanted to give you guys the chapter anyway!

Vic breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that the group standing in the lobby *didn't* consist of Patrick or Henry. Three people stood in front of them, guns raised and pointed in their direction while a fourth stood watch at the doors.

"Richie!" Eddie lowered his pistol and ran forward, throwing his arms around Richie's neck and knocking him off kilter, his arm sliding from around Vic's neck.

Richie's back hit the wall of the elevator, Eddie's body being the only thing that was keeping him up. He wasn't bothered by the fact that Richie's entire body felt cold. He was more concerned with the fact that he was *alive*. Richie weakly raised his arms, wrapping them around the smaller man while his head dropped onto Eddie's shoulder. Eddie stumbled slightly from the sudden weight of Richie leaning against him so heavily, his fingers gripping at the back of his head.

"Hey Eds." Richie's voice sounded slurred; drugged from the Zirifran that had been pumped into him. "Missed you. Does this mean I can sleep now?"

Eddie tightened his arms around Richie. "We'll get you back to the others and then you can sleep all you want, okay?"

Richie nodded, his fingers clutching at the back of Eddie's shirt. "You gonna stay with me the whole time?"

Eddie smiled, pressing his forehead against Richie's shoulder. "Sure thing. Whatever you want, Richie. I won't leave your side."

"Mm, sounds good to me."

“What do we do about *this* guy?” Lucas asked, rifle pointed at Vic. “He’s the one who kidnapped them, right?”

Beverly tightened the grip on her pistol. “I don’t know. I wasn’t there when Richie was taken.”

Jane stepped in front of Vic, putting herself between the two men. “He saved us. He might have brought us here but that’s because he knew they could help us. *We* don’t have a real doctor, Lucas. These guys do. He knew that. Patrick is the one who just rides around and runs down anyone he sees so they can have lab rats. Vic’s not like him. Vic is the reason we’re getting out. Anything he did was to help us. He’s being held here too.”

“We can figure this out later.” Bill called from across the lobby. “We have to leave before those other guys come back.”

Lucas reluctantly lowered his pistol and shoved it back into its holster, grabbing the radio from his belt. “We’re coming. Get your ass over here.”

Vic helped Eddie to drag the drugged Richie across the lobby and outside. Lucas ran ahead of them, gun poised and ready to shoot anything that came out of the surrounding woodland, Will directly at his side while Bill, Beverly, and Jane brought up the rear, looking back over their shoulders to make sure they weren’t being followed.

A metallic green mini-van came to a screeching halt in front of them the second they reached the road, Lucas yanking the back door open and ushered Will inside. Will clambered right into the very back with Jane close behind him, Eddie releasing Richie long enough to get into middle row of seats. Richie clumsily climbed into the van with help from Vic, Eddie reaching out for his arm to pull him onto the seats.

Richie slumped against Eddie as Vic and Beverly climbed into the car and piled awkwardly right in the back, Bill following and slamming the door behind him the moment he was sitting down. He took the final seat next to Richie, shooting concerned glances at him. Richie was horribly pale, his hair sticking to his face from the sweat that was covering his body. His breaths were laboured with the attempt to keep himself from vomiting, and Eddie scrambled to his feet to prop

Richie up against the door and wind the window down.

The moment Lucas had climbed into the front, Steve threw the car into gear and sped off.

“How many places can a person hide in this town?” Dustin asked, stepping into a bedroom and shining his flashlight around, finding only dusty furniture, scattered items, and the boarded up windows of the ground floor apartment.

“Apparently more than we thought there were.” Nancy hissed from across the hallway, carefully pushing open a bathroom door. “Clear.”

Dustin crouched by the bed and directed his flashlight into the darkness under it. “Clear here too.”

“Clear down here.” Ben called from the living room.

“Same here.” Mike’s voice called from the kitchen.

The four of them gathered back into the dark hallway, exhaustion clear on their face. They’d been searching all day for signs of Georgie, and once again, they’d come up empty.

“I do *not* want to be the one to tell Bill or Sharon we still haven’t found him.” Mike said, glancing over to Ben. “You don’t think he’s –”

Ben vehemently shook his head. “No. Georgie’s tough. You’ve seen what he can do. He *has* to be here somewhere.”

“That crier must have really been something.” Nancy said, leading them back out of the apartment to search the next one.

“They’re unnerving.” Dustin said, holding his pistol out as Nancy pushed the door open to the next apartment. “They just... cry. Max thinks they were uh... people who suffered with depression or bipolar when they were alive. She thinks something in the brain stayed when they became infected that makes them a crier and... makes their mood change from sobbing to vicious slashing.”

“No wonder it freaked Georgie out.” Ben said, stepping into the apartment behind Dustin. “We really could have done with Bill for

this. If he's hiding really well, he'd respond to Bill being with us."

"But Bill went to get Richie." Mike said, opening the closet in the corner of the room while Dustin checked under yet another bed. "He feels like it's partly his fault because Richie was chasing Georgie down and trying to get him to stop."

"But it's not." Ben said firmly.

"Yeah. It's not. It's no one's fault. It just... happened. It could have easily happened to Bill or Eddie. But it doesn't stop Bill from feeling guilty."

"Guilt's a powerful thing." Nancy's voice carried from the hallway where she was keeping watch. "There's not a day that goes by when I don't blame myself for Mike being taken because of the horde. Everything was so chaotic and I told him to run. It was the first damn time he ever listened to me and that car hit him and two men took him away."

Steve came to a screeching halt on the hospital parking lot. Behind them, the gates rattled as they were closed and Steven moved quickly to get out of the mini-van and open the door to pull Richie from inside. He'd vomited six times out of the window on their way back. As soon as Eddie and Bill were out of the car, they were taking hold of Richie and dragging him towards to the hospital with Lucas ahead of them.

"Move, move, move." Lucas shouted, pushing through various people as he tried to clear a path for group behind him, knocking Max slightly off kilter as he rushed by.

"What the –" Max was cut off by a shout of 'Will' before Joyce Byres had dashed out of the crowds of people and grabbed her son, pulling him into a hug.

"What happened to Richie?" Stan asked as Beverly jogged over to him.

"I don't know." Beverly said, gnawing at her bottom lip. "He was like that when we found them." She gestured at Vic with her head. "I

think *he* knows, though.”

Vic, who had taken the duffle bag from Jane moments before Max had enveloped her in a hug, shouldered the item easily and glanced over to Beverly. “I do. I can tell you everything but I have to get this bag to your friends first.”

“Why?”

“Because Richie needs the Zirifran.”

Lucas shoved the door open to the ward that Eddie was sharing with Beverly and Ben, yanking the blanket off so Bill and Eddie could lie him down. He hunted through the drawers and closet in the room, finding a bedpan which he thrust into Bill’s hands.

“Gotta keep him warm...” Lucas was pulling blankets from the closet and handing them to Eddie who wrapped them around Richie while he vomited the green sludge into the bedpan again.

“What’s wrong with him?” Bill asked, worry clear in his voice as he held the metallic item to Richie’s mouth.

“Zirifran.” Vic said, tossing the duffle bag onto the bed and unzipping it. “We tried to get him out before they started his liquid trial but they found out he wasn’t taking the pills and Doctor Maxwell started to inject the liquid version into him.”

Lucas inhaled sharply. “Is Zirifran what killed Mike?”

Vic grimaced, hunting through the bag. “This stage was, yes. It has flu like symptoms; hot and cold fevers, sickness, delirious spells, aching...”

“But what *is* Zirifran? What does it *do*?”

“It was made as a cancer cure. It destroys the cancer gene but it makes the body weak for a while... like really weak. Some people react good to it and some bad, just like any trial medication. Doctor Grey tossed out the bodies of the people who died during the trials but they weren’t dead. Lucille said they started to get up and walk around and that...”

"That's why zombies started showing up." Lucas finished. "So is Richie gonna become –"

"I don't know." Vic admitted, extracting a bottle of pills from the bag and unscrewing the cap quickly. "I didn't turn into one. Will didn't. Jane didn't... the other people still at that lab didn't. It depends on the body. If he survives the flu stage... Richie will be a carrier."

"I thought carriers had to be born like that?" Lucas asked, brow knitting in confusion.

"Carriers aren't born." Vic said, fishing two pills out of the tub and handing them to Eddie. "Make sure he takes those. Zirifran wasn't destroying the cancer gene like it was supposed to. It just altered it. Remember the flu symptoms? You get them when you're bitten by a zombie too. Starting to get it yet?"

Lucas dropped his gun with a clatter. "Zirifran is in the zombie's saliva... like a disease... and it's shared through a bite."

Vic nodded. "That's why they didn't kill people for showing the symptoms in evacuation centres. That's why you had to report anyone who was sick. It was CDC orders. They had to wait it out. People who survived the sickness... they were marked as carriers and sent off."

"How long does it take for the flu to pass?" Eddie asked, soothing his thumb against Richie's throat to help him swallow the pills.

"It could be anything between three weeks and three months. You just have to wait it out. Ween him off the Zirifran to help him get better. Just because the symptoms stop it doesn't mean he's better. Lucille spent three months weening me off it. Fortunately... she gave me a three month supply to be able to help you."

"Why?" Lucas asked. "Like why are you helping us?"

"Because I'm not like them. They let me leave the building because I was compliant. Because Lucille told me to be compliant but... they still didn't *fully* trust me. That's why I only ever left with Patrick. They knew he could reign me in; drag me back by my hair if he had

to.”

“How did you even end up in there?”

“Patrick hit me with a car.”

Richie laughed, the sound weak. “Fuck that hurt. Is that just his thing?”

“Yeah.” Vic tapped the tip of his foot lightly against the floor. “The doctors want patients, so Patrick hits survivors he sees with cars. They can’t put up a fight if they’re barely conscious. The teenager in the yellow hoodie... Patrick was gonna cut him off one block over but then Richie dashed out of the alley.”

There was another weak laugh from Richie. “Shit. Mine really was an accident.”

Bill shifted uncomfortably. “Did he ever go after –”

“No. He never bothered with them again. I told him they’d be long gone.”

“So Georgie’s still out there somewhere.”

“We’ll find him, Bill.” Lucas assured. “We have the best people out there looking. For now though, we need to tell the others about this Zirifran and... about Will and Jane.”

“I’m gonna stay here.” Eddie said, taking the bedpan from Bill. “I told him I wouldn’t leave him. Bill can tell me anything else that I need to know.”

Bill nodded, releasing the bedpan once Eddie had a good grip on it. “Sure thing Eddie. I have to tell Stan what’s going on with Richie too. He looked really worried.”

“Tell Staniel I’m fine apart from throwing my guts up... probably literally.” Richie groaned, suddenly bending over the bedpan again to vomit. “Christ this is gross. You sure you wanna stick around Eds?”

Eddie nodded, tentatively rubbing his hand against Richie’s back.

“You asked me if I’d stay with you. I told you I would. I’m not about to leave you just because you’re vomiting up some sludge.”

Vic watched them silently for a moment, jaw clenching slightly. There was no way in hell Henry or Patrick would have done any of this for him. When he was under the Zirifran trial he had been alone in a room until Lucille had started to take care of him.

He turned, following Lucas and Bill from the room and closing the door behind him.

16. Chapter 16

Stan raised his flashlight, looking around the aisle of the clothing store he was standing in. The foot brace made a dull thumping noise as he stepped forward, attempting to see in the darkness that was barely laminated by his flashlight. Behind him, Bill fiddled with something on the scope of his sniper, changing the vision for it into a darkish green before lifting it to his face; a red beam extending through the dark where it formed a dot on Stan's back.

"Stan, stop."

Stan stopped, bringing the flashlight down onto the ground to the body lying at his feet that he hadn't noticed since he was too busy looking ahead of them. He nudged its shoulder with his foot and breathed a sigh of relief. It was just a dead body. It wasn't a zombie that was about to grab him. Stan turned back to face Bill, eyes shining almost white in the night vision of the scope, and Bill could see the relief on his face.

"I got you. You just focus on ahead and I'll direct you." Bill said, angling the scope towards the ground. "You need to veer left and you can get through the two bodies."

Stan nodded and did as instructed. Bill guided him down the aisle perfectly, almost reaching out at one point when Stan stumbled over a discarded coat hanger, but he regained his balance quickly and continued on his path.

"Bill." Stan hissed, spotting something ahead and lifting his flashlight again.

Bill followed his line of vision with the scope, his hands tightening on the gun. "Is that..."

Stan reached out, plucking the bloodied yellow hoodie from the cash register and hold it in his hands. Bill directed the scope down at the floor where a pair of jeans and a shirt had been tossed down, and Bill could feel the relief wash over him.

“Georgie was here.”

“Alive.” Stan confirmed. “He came in here alive and he changed his clothes. This blood is still wet too.” Placing the flashlight into his mouth, Stan began to inspect the hoodie closer, fingers moving rapidly over the material.

“What are you –”

Stan shushed him with a hiss around the flashlight, turning the hoodie over and repeating the process before tossing it aside and bending awkwardly to grab the jeans and do the same. Once he was done, he hastily removed the flashlight from his mouth with a grin. “There’s no holes...”

“What?”

“There are no holes in the clothes, Bill, and the blood is in the centre of the hoodie! That means he wasn’t bitten! This blood is from a zombie he killed! It’s still wet. Georgie was here *recently*. Very recently.”

“Wuh- we gotta find him.” Bill said.

Stan nodded. “We *will* find him.”

“Yeah.”

“Bill look.” Stan was now pointing his flashlight at the fire exit across off to the side which was being held open by a mannequin, a bloody arrow drawn onto it under a B. “Your brother is a damn genius.”

“Let’s go.”

They made for the fire exit, rushing out into the alleyway beyond where another bloody arrow greeted them, veering them off to the left, a dead zombie lying in a heap on the ground. The alleyway led them to a store filled street, another arrow veering them right.

“I really hope no one else followed these and got to him before us.” Stan said as they followed their seventh arrow to an apartment building.

“I just hope you were right and Georgie’s the one who made these.” Bill said, pushing open the door to the building and holding it open for Stan.

Stan limped into the building and turned his flashlight back on as Bill joined him, shining it around the lobby. A trail of blood veered into the stairwell as though someone had dragged something along and they followed the trail, taking the stairs carefully until they reached the third floor, stepping into a dark hallway.

In the beam of light from the flashlight they could see a pile of torn open zombies in front of one of the doors, and when Stan raised the flashlight, a bloodied X came into view; drawn quickly onto the wood of the door. Stan squeezed at Bill’s hand, giving him a nod, and Bill approached the door, reaching out to grab the handle.

“Georgie?” Bill called, stepping over the pile of zombies and reaching for Stan to help him climb over. “What if he’s not here?”

“Then we keep looking.” Stan said, closing the door behind them. “I think he is though. He took the time to make a corpse shield for the door.”

Bill nodded, lifting the sniper to his face again and guiding Stan through the dark hallway to first door he could see. Stan slowly reached for the door and opened it, shining the flashlight into the bedroom.

“Bill!” Stan hissed, whipping his head back around, his eyes once again shining white in the night vision. “You’re gonna wanna see this.”

Bill moved hastily through the hallway to Stan’s side, looking into the room, his breath hitching in his throat. “Georgie!”

Georgie’s eyes snapped open as the shout startled him out of his sleep. It took a moment for everything to register to the teenager, but Georgie was soon uncurling from his position and scrambling to his feet. He tackled into Bill who dropped the sniper rifle and wound his arms around his older brother, hands gripping at the back of his jacket.

"I knew it." Georgie said, relief clear in his voice as he pressed his face into Bill's chest. "I knew you'd find me! I'm sorry I ran off."

Bill smiled, clutching at Georgie. "It's okay. That crier freaked you out and you ran. Don't be sorry for surviving. Never be sorry for that, Georgie. I'm just glad you're alive."

Georgie grinned, but it didn't last long. "Is Richie okay? I saw what happened to him. I wanted to go back and help but then I saw those two guys and –"

"You did the right thing when you kept running, Georgie. He's fine." Stan assured him, not wanting to worry Georgie with Richie's current condition. "He's with Eddie being lazy."

Bill finally released Georgie, ruffling his hair. "Come on. We need to get some rest. We can't travel back to the others right now. It's starting to get dark and we'll just end up getting lost."

They headed into the bedroom, Bill closing the door and shoving a set of drawers in front of it with Georgie's help. The three of them piled onto the bed with Bill in the middle, settling down for the night. The sooner they slept, the sooner day would come and they could head back.

Bill stayed awake to listen out for any zombies that might somehow stumble across them (he wasn't about to take the risk of a feral coming down on them since they seemed immune to zombie shields), listening to the soft breathing of Georgie and Stan while they slept.

Georgie had his back to Bill, facing the barricaded door while Stan was as usual, curled slightly into Bill's side. Bill rolled onto his own side towards Stan, curling an arm around him and burying his nose into his hair. Stan shifted, moving closer until he was pressed up against Bill; face buried into his shirt.

"You're supposed to be sleeping, Stan." Bill mumbled against his hair.

Stan let out a breathy laugh. "You're the one who woke me up being all grabby while I was sleeping, Bill."

Bill chuckled, pressing a light kiss to Stan's forehead. "Sorry."

When Richie woke, he instantly became of one thing. *He could see clearly.* He wasn't wearing his glasses. He never slept in them. Eddie would have taken them off so he didn't break them. And yet somehow he could see perfectly.

He sat up quickly, examining the room around him. He was alone right now; a good thing since he could panic in peace.

How the hell could he see perfectly? He'd always been so blind that the lenses of glasses were really thick, and even *with* the thick strong lenses he was still forced to squint sometimes to see more clearly. But now everything was perfect like his brain had turned everything into some kind of HD vision.

A creak sounded as the door to the bathroom of the ward opened and Eddie stepped into the room, a towel draped over his shoulders to keep his still wet hair from dampening his shirt. Richie inhaled sharply the moment Eddie was in the room, his nose scrunching.

Eddie smelt... *alive.*

He could smell the blood and pure *life* that flowed through him, and he could feel the snarl that started to build up in his chest as his brain kicked into some kind of primal mindset.

Rip.

Tear.

Devour.

"Richie? Are you okay?" Eddie asked.

Richie swallowed the snarl before it had chance to rip from his throat, fisting his hands into the blanket to ground himself from the hazy thoughts. "I... Eds... *I can fucking see.*"

"What?"

"I can see *without* my glasses. How the fuck is this possible? What the fuck is going on?"

“You can... see? Like perfectly?”

“Yeah and it’s *freaking me the hell out.*”

“Maybe it’s something to do with the Zirifran they put you on.” Eddie suggested, approaching the bed and taking a seat next to Richie.

“Like... maybe it’s a side effect or some – holy shit.”

“What?” Richie asked, the panic rising in his voice.

“Your eyes...”

“What about them?”

Eddie said nothing, grabbing Richie by the wrist and pulling him from the bed. Richie stumbled and allowed Eddie to drag him to the bathroom where he span him to face the mirror, pointing directly at Richie’s eyes in the reflection where there was a white ring was framing his pupil, fading until it blended into the blue of his iris which were now framed by a thick black ring.

“Those aren’t my eyes... Eds... what the fuck is going on?”

“I... I don’t know Rich.” Eddie said, panic creeping onto his face.

He thought back to the countless zombies they’d encountered since the start of the outbreak.

The dead white eyes framed in black...

Richie had the eyes of the infected.

17. Chapter 17

“So, it’s a side effect?” Richie asked, chewing at the inside of his cheek.

Eddie had deemed him well enough to actually leave the ward room they were in since he could actually stand up and walk without needing to be supported, and now they were sitting in the cafeteria across from Jane at one of the tables.

“Yeah, we all have it.” Jane confirmed, crossing her legs to sit more comfortably on her chair. “People just don’t notice because it’s small.”

“So it’s not gonna...”

“Oh no, no, no, Richie that’s not gonna happen to you. You’re not gonna turn into a zombie.” Jane assured him. “You survived the flu stage. You’re okay. You’re not gonna die.”

Richie seemed sceptical about her words, glancing across the cafeteria to where Eddie was talking with Beverly while they grabbed food. “Jane... I need to know something.”

“What? What’s bothering you?”

“When... when they did this to you did you... did you hear any voices in your head? Did you want to...”

“Tear someone up and just eat them? Yeah. I did. I was put on the Zirifran before Will was back in that lab. I wanted to pounce on him and tear him to pieces. Its normal, Richie. It’s... part of the process.”

Richie swallowed, turning his attention fully back to Jane. “Does it go away? Every time I smell someone...”

“It takes a while but it does. You’re gonna be fine because you’re fighting it, Richie. I promise.”

“But what happens now? I’m a carrier right?”

“That’s not a bad thing. We’re immune.”

“But we can pass it on.”

Jane inhaled sharply, a frown crossing her face. “Yes. It’s passed to another person through our saliva. It’s just like how a zombie passes it on by biting into another person. The method is slightly different but the results are the same. Zombies.”

“I feel like I should be fucking quarantined from everyone.”

“Don’t.” Jane held up a hand to silence him. “Don’t say something like that. At one point during your flu stage Steve wanted to quarantine you from everyone else in the hospital until it stopped. Eddie wouldn’t let him.”

“He should have.”

“He told you that he would stay with you the whole time, Richie, and he did. Eddie didn’t leave your side unless he needed to use a bathroom or shower. We had to bring food to him to make sure he ate.”

“I know – damn it I just – I’m not even sure if I’m even human anymore or... if I’m dangerous. I could hurt them – *him*. I feel like they should lock me up. At least until the voices stop.”

“That won’t help the situation Richie. Here’s some advice.” Jane lowered her arms to the table, resting them across one another. “Expose yourself to him.”

Richie choked. “*Excuse you?*”

“Hear me out and get your head out of the gutter. The more that you’re around him... the more familiar the scent becomes. It will help the voices die down and this darker side inside of you will stop.”

“I don’t know if I can do that. He just – he smells so... *alive*. I can *smell* his blood. His fucking *blood* Jane. And then that voice is there... telling me tear him into pieces. I’m... I’m *scared*.”

Jane reached over, placing a comforting hand to his arm and

squeezing. “I *know* Richie, but you *have* to keep fighting it. If you don’t you’ll be worse than a zombie. The best way to fight it is to be around him constant –”

“Hey, I got you some food. You need it.” Eddie said, placing a bowl of soup in front of Richie.

Richie stared down at the food, inhaling sharply as Eddie took the seat next him. *Devour.* “Th-thanks Eds.”

“Richie... are... are you okay?” Eddie asked tentatively.

“Stomach still feels weird.” *Pounce.*

“That’s because you haven’t eaten in *days* Richie. Your stomach is so empty right now.” Jane pointed out. “You *need* to eat. It’ll be good for you. It’ll help.”

Richie caught her hidden meaning. *It’ll help you get some semblance of being normal again.* Richie grabbed the spoon from the bowl, grimacing at the smell of the soup. It wasn’t prey. It wasn’t alive. He forced himself to eat it anyway. He *had* to.

Not alive.

Lunge.

“Richie!”

Richie’s head snapped up at the shout, his face breaking into a grin as he saw Stan limping into the room. Forcing some more of the soup down his throat, Richie scrambled to his feet and over to Stan, throwing his arms around him. Stan stumbled, slamming his good foot down onto the ground to keep him balanced and standing.

“Stan.” Richie tightened his hold on him, fingers digging into the back of his shirt as he breathed in the scent. It was so alive... just like Eddie.

Weakened prey.

Tear.

“How you doing buddy?” Stan was running his fingers through Richie’s hair in a soothing manner. “And where the hell are your glasses? Don’t tell me you broke them like an idiot. We can’t just get you a new pair anymore.”

“I’m...” *Claw*. “Better. Kind of. Still a little off and... I don’t need them anymore. Whatever they did to me in that place... it made me able to see. I got that fucking HD vision like the rest of you guys. Where have *you* been?”

“With Bill... looking for Georgie.”

Eat. “Did you –”

“Yes. We found him Richie.”

Richie breathed a sigh of relief. “Good. I was worried. I tried Stan. I tried to –”

“I know.”

“I should have tried harder. I failed Lucy and I should have –”

“Richie you got hit by a fucking *car* and were barely conscious from what they told me.” Stan chided, nudging him lightly in the back of his head with a fist. “You couldn’t have done anything else at the time. You *tried* to keep up with him to keep him safe and that’s all that matters, okay? Bill was never angry with you.”

Richie nodded. “Y-yeah. Okay. That’s all that matters.”

Stan smiled. “Good. Now go and finish your food before you give Eddie some kind of worry induced panic attack.”

“Right!” Richie released Stan and pivoted on his heel, heading back to his table.

“Hey Richie?” Stan called. Richie halted, looking back at him over his shoulder. *Bite*. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Richie smiled.

And it was *genuine*.

Devour.

Richie dropped back into his seat next to Eddie, picking up the spoon again while Stan wandered off to get some food of his own. He hated how *not alive* the food was. He needed it to be alive. Prey. The thrill of the hunt and...

Richie forced a spoonful of the soup down his throat.

He felt Eddie's hand link with his own between them, thumb gently stroking the back of his hand. "Don't force yourself to eat it *all* if you can't. Baby steps Richie. You're still recovering. I'll get you some water."

Eddie stood, his hand sliding out of Richie's as he walked off from the table. Jane was still watching him carefully, and it was just *now* that Richie noticed the same white ring that framed her pupil just like his own. *People don't notice because it's small.*

Eddie noticed because he was so close.

Stan hadn't mentioned it when they were talking.

"You need to keep eating." Jane said, propping her head up with her hand. "I know Eddie said not to force yourself but you need to. The more food you eat, the more your system returns to normal. You'll stop... craving his flesh."

"You make everything so dirty." Richie mumbled around his spoon.

"That's because you *take* it dirty, pervert." Jane said, an air of amusement to her voice. "You're doing good. By now I would have had Will pinned to the floor trying to sink my nails into him and rip him open. You should tell Eddie what's going on with you. If he knows... he'll be able to help you even if it's in little ways."

Richie shook his head, idly stirring his spoon in the soup. "I can't, Jane."

"Friend's don't lie, Richie."

"It's not that. I just... I don't want them to know what's going on just yet. Not until I have a better grasp on it. I'll tell them eventually but... right now... they wouldn't understand. *I* don't understand. You do. You've been there."

Jane sighed, once again reaching for Richie's arm. "Okay. You don't have to tell him right now... or any of them. I'll help you as much as I can but... I don't know *everything*. I only know the things I've experienced."

Richie nodded. "It's *enough*, Jane. It's enough to help me get a grip on this. Everything is so chaotic right now... in here." He tapped a finger against his temple. "I can't think straight for two seconds without –"

"You were out for a while so your brain is still fuzzy." Jane said quickly, cutting Richie off as Eddie approached the table again, holding out a plastic cup to Richie. "You'll be okay when you're used to being awake and eating again. The first few days are hard."

"Was it like this for you too?" Eddie asked, concern clear on his face while Richie sipped from the cup of water, his nose scrunching in distaste.

"It was. Unfortunately there isn't much we can do. Just... stay with him as much as you can. It makes it easier for him, I think."

"Definitely does." Richie said, placing the cup down and pointing his spoon across the cafeteria. "So Eds, you wanna tell me when *that* happened?"

Eddie followed the direction of the spoon across to the table where Bill and Stan were sitting. Bill had linked his arm with Stan's, and it was *very* clear their hands were connected between them while they ate, Georgie talking animatedly between them. For a moment, Eddie lingered on the thought of *when they hell did they enter*, but quickly dismissed it as he was too busy taking care of Richie.

"Sometime while you were gone and Bill was playing nurse."

Richie hummed, seeming to accept this answer as he dipped his spoon back into his bowl. "Well, Bill's good for Stan. Might bring him

out of his shell more. Stan's too... closed off. It's kind of worrying sometimes."

"What about you? What's good for you?"

Richie paused, the spoon inches from his mouth as his brow furrowed. "Anyone who can wrangle my demon ass I guess."

*You. But you're not immune. I could hurt you. I could **kill** you. Right now I don't even trust myself to sit next to you without trying to rip you to shreds.*

But you're good for me. You know how to calm me.

You're always there.

Why can't you be immune? Why do I have to be a fucking carrier?

Jane nudged his leg under the table with her foot, offering him a smile. "You left us for a minute there. I think you need some more rest."

"Y-yeah. I think you're right. Baby steps, right Eds?"

Eddie nodded, stading and holding his hand out to Richie. "So let's get you back in bed for a bit."

18. Chapter 18

Richie was surprisingly still while Eddie unwrapped the bandages from his torso, his brow furrowing in confusion as he let them fall to the ground at Richie's feet. There were *no* marks on his skin. He'd *watched* car slam into Richie and then Richie roll up onto the hood and crack the damn windshield before rolling back down onto the pavement.

Richie had been barely conscious on the road when Eddie had watched Vic and Patrick take him. There should have been more than a couple of broken ribs. There should have been more than a few cuts. But there weren't. Richie had already healed from his injuries. He *shouldn't* have. This didn't make sense.

It had only been about two weeks at best.

Richie should still be hurt and recovering.

But he wasn't.

"Eds? Is there... something wrong?" Richie asked, looking down at him with concern as his fingers tapped idly against the sink unit he was leaning against.

Eddie looked up at him, a frown crossing his face. "You... you shouldn't look this good."

"Well, thanks for the compliment, Eds!"

"Not like that you idiot! I just mean... well... you don't look like you were hit by a car and you still should. It wasn't that long ago when it happened, Rich!" Eddie was now pressing his fingers against Richie's ribcage, applying some pressure to the area. "Does that hurt?"

"No. Should it?"

Eddie hummed, his tongue clicking against his teeth. "It *should* but it doesn't... there's something wrong about this. Broken bones take longer to heal than this."

"I'm just going to chalk it down to the Zirifran flowing through my blood." Richie said, looking down at his torso and taking in the unmarked area. "I already know I should have cuts that I *don't* have and I'm pretty sure my face should still be *extremely* bruised. It's almost like... the stuff healed me or something."

Eddie let out a huff of hair. "It might have healed you, Richie, but it also turned you into a carrier of the zombie virus."

Richie heaved a sigh, his grip on the sink tightening until his knuckles had turned white. "That it did, Eds, that it did."

"Which really sucks."

"You're telling me."

"Sucks for me as well as it does you."

Richie slowly arched a brow. "Why?"

Eddie glared up at him. "Because I really wanted to kiss you, you fucking dumbass, but you told us this thing spreads through saliva so now I can't."

Richie was suddenly smiling down at him fondly. He pushed himself up from the sink unit and opened his arms for Eddie who stepped into them, curling his arms around Richie's waist and burying his face into his chest. Richie wrapped his arms around him and buried his nose into Eddie's hair. He inhaled sharply, taking in Eddie's scent which now had a slight undertone of his own mixed into it.

Devour.

He could feel the snarl building up, his arms tightening around Eddie until his fingers were gripping at the back of his shirt.

"What the fuck was that?" Eddie asked, suddenly lifting his head to look up at Richie again.

"What was what?"

"It sounded – did you just *snarl* at me?"

“Not *at* you, no.” Richie played with the ends of Eddie’s hair, entwining some of it around his fingers. “I... I’ve been keeping it from you the last couple of days because I’m trying to... get a grasp on it but... you know now because you’ve heard it. You just smell so *alive* and... its zombie instincts I guess? I just didn’t want you to start avoiding me because of it. I know it’s selfish but –”

Eddie thumped a fist against his back. “Idiot. You should have told me about this. I wouldn’t avoid you just because you snarl once in a while because you have some zombie instincts. I *like* you. I’m gonna stay here and help you through this.”

Richie’s fingers sank into Eddie’s hair, his hand curling into a fist against the back of his head. He wanted nothing more than to just give in and give Eddie exactly what he wanted, but he couldn’t. He would infect Eddie, and then Eddie would get sick and he would die and become a zombie. He needed to control himself.

Richie settled for pecking at the tip of Eddie’s nose. “I hate this being a carrier thing.”

Eddie scrunched up his nose. “I do too. We can make this work though.”

“Yeah, and then one day I can actually kiss you when I’m better or when you’re immune. I mean technically I can now but...” Richie tapped a finger against Eddie’s lips. “Not on the mouth. Looks like you have to endure nose and forehead kisses. I’m not risking even the tiniest bit of my saliva getting in there.”

Stan hadn’t realised that there was anything different that morning when he’d woken up. He’d climbed out of Bill’s arms and out of bed, glanced to Georgie who was still sleeping in what *should* have been Bill’s bed; curled up almost cat-like under the blankets, and made his way to the bathroom. He’d been halfway through brushing his teeth when he’d looked down and noticed the different something.

He hadn’t put the foot brace back on when he’d woken up. Bill had insisted that Stan take the brace off while he was sleeping to put an end to the horrible indentations it was putting in his leg (and partly so he stopped kicking Bill painfully in the leg whenever he rolled

over).

He couldn't feel any pain in his ankle. Stan bounced on the spot a couple of times to test the weight, breathing a relieved sigh at the lack of pain.

He was finally healed.

"Oh my god, are you moving around *without* the brace on your foot?" Bill asked, leaning against the doorframe with a smile.

"Looks that way." Stan said, finishing up his task before crossing the bathroom to where Bill stood. "You don't have to be a crutch anymore."

Bill's smile turned into a teasing smirk. "That's a shame. I was kind of enjoying being so needed."

Stan leaned up, pressing a gentle kiss to Bill's mouth. Bill let out a satisfied hum, his hands coming to rest against Stan's hips and yank him forward until their bodies were touching. No hiss. No wince. He didn't have to be overly gentle with Stan. He didn't need to treat him like some kind of fragile ornament.

"Gross." Georgie said, now awake and sitting up on his bed. "Get a room."

Bill barely pulled away from the kiss, his mouth still moving against Stan's as he spoke. "We have one, you're just in it."

Georgie made another sound of disgust when Bill returned to kissing Stan, throwing his blanket aside and getting out of the bed to leave the room; slamming the door behind him so loudly that Bill was forced to break the kiss to laugh.

"A CDC centre?" Steve eyed Vic warily, his voice unsure. "You... you want me to just hand Will and Jane over to people like that after what the doctors in *your* place did to them? I'm not fucking crazy, Vic."

"You're not handing them over and this isn't some secret underground CDC who experiments on humans." Vic said,

straightening up from the wall he'd been leaning on. "Lucille told me she was going to tell Jessica what Doctor Grey has been doing. This is a real CDC in Atlanta. The most they're gonna do is take a blood sample or two from us to see how we've bonded with the Zirifran. Think about it. If they can find what made us survive it... they can make something that can make everyone who is still alive immune. They can destroy the virus that's already in us. No more carriers. No more fear of the zombies."

"Say I let you take them..." Steve glanced back over his shoulder briefly to where Will and Jane were sitting at one of day room tables with Beverly and Mike. "What if you don't make it to Atlanta? What if these Doctors are worse?"

"Look, I already talked to Bill's group about this. Richie agreed to go because he doesn't want to be a carrier, and they're gonna get him there. Will and Jane would be safe the whole time and we wouldn't leave them alone with the doctors. Just... at least talk to them about it. It has to be their call. You can't make that for them."

"I know I can't. I just want them to be safe, and I don't think going outside the walls that we built to protect this place is the best thing for them. But... if they go... if that's what they want to do... then I'm going too."

"You don't have to do that."

"It's what Jonathan would have wanted me to do. Protect his brother. Joyce already lost one son to this world and she doesn't need to lose another one because I hand them over to some strangers. If he goes, I go, and if this place looks even slightly sketchy, I'm both Will and Jane out of there before anything can happen to them."

Lucas paced the makeshift walkway that ran along the wooden walls they'd built around the hospital grounds, sniper resting idly against his shoulder. Max was pacing along the other side, stopping when she reached the area where the walkway cut off for the gate before she turned and paced back in the other direction. It was Steve's idea to always have guards on the walkways to cover all the areas of the wall. They couldn't risk a leaper or a climber getting their way in. They had to keep the people in the walls safe.

Max came to a sudden stop, lifting her sniper to look through the scope. “Lucas I think we have a problem.”

Lucas moved his own sniper to his face, lining the scope with his eye and following the line of Max’s vision. “Fuck that doesn’t look good.”

“Warning shot?”

“Yeah.”

Max pulled the trigger.

The SUV heading down the main street didn’t halt its advance when the bullet clipped its hood, only stopping when it reached the crosswalk and two people climbed out. They recognized the first person as Patrick as they’d witnessed him taking three people at different times, but his two companions were unknown to them.

The one with the mullet stepped forward, arms spread to show that he was unarmed.

“Sup fuckers? My name’s Henry and I believe you have something that belongs to us. I’d be really nice if you could return patients eleven, twelve, fourteen, and our dear friend *Victor* to us.”

19. Chapter 19

“They said that we have one hour to hand them over willingly or they’re breaking down that gate, coming in, and *dragging* them back to the lab. They also... think Vic is here unwillingly.” Max said, furiously pacing the day room; sneakers squeaking against the linoleum floor. “Which... I guess your friend Lucille told them that to keep you safe. I wouldn’t want people like that knowing it was an inside job either.”

“We can’t just hand them over to these guys.” Eddie said, his tone firm. “The last time they had Richie we didn’t know if he was gonna die or not when we got him back. He couldn’t even stand up on his own.”

“Hey, no one is going anywhere.” Steve said, looking back over his shoulder out the window where Nancy and Lucas were still on the walkway, ready to attack if needed. “Just... calm down. We’re not going to let them take Richie... or Jane... or Will... not even Vic.”

“Henry’s relentless. He won’t stop until he has what he wants.” Vic leaned back in his chair with a sigh. “I’d take his threat seriously if I were you.”

“So then what are we supposed to do?” Beverly asked, gripping at Ben’s hand.

“Take Henry and Patrick out. Belch is like me. He just complies to make his life easier. He’s not a problem or a threat to any of us. Henry and Patrick are the problem. If you take them out, this ends and everyone is safe from the lab.”

“And how are we supposed to take them out exactly?” Ben asked, wincing as Beverly squeezed his hand a little too tightly.

“Give them what they want. Well, kind of. You wanna keep Will and Jane safest. Tell Henry they died. I’ve seen Zirifran patients at their stage who have still died. It’s not a perfected drug. Tell them they’re dead, and send me out with Richie and two other people. You need them to think I’m here unwillingly so I have to be handed over by

other people. Make them *think* you're complying with what they want. When I'm close enough I can take them out."

"I'm sorry... you want us to put Richie in the line of fire on the *chance* you can take them both out?" Stan snapped. "Absolutely *not*. He annoys the fuck out of me but even *he* doesn't deserve *that*. I'm not about to risk his life on this plan."

"Aw Staniel, I didn't know you cared so much about little old me. That's so comforting!" Richie winked at him before he fell serious. "I *should* do it though. Hear me out. Vic needs people who are a good shot. The best shots we have are me, Mike, and Eddie. Max, Bill, Stan and Lucas are the best snipers. We can use all of this to our advantage."

"This could work actually." Steve said, humming thoughtfully. "Nancy's pretty good with a sniper rifle too. We keep her and Lucas outside so we don't raise suspicion. We have to act natural about this while keeping the other snipers inside at windows. If it starts going to shit..."

"Yeah, then you use the snipers to take them out." Vic finished for him. "It shouldn't come to that though. As long as we can get close enough to Patrick and Henry... only those of us outside the gate need to do anything."

Steve grabbed his radio from his waist, bringing it up to his mouth. "Lucas, listen up, here's the plan. I'm only going to go through this once so get Nancy next to you without it looking too suspicious. Just make it look like you're having a regular conversation."

"She's already here, Steve. Tell us what we need to do."

"We're gonna take them out, and this is how we're doing it."

Thirty minutes later, Vic was standing in one of the wards, tucking a pistol into the back of Richie's pants and pulling his shirt down to conceal it carefully underneath the material. Henry had, fortunately, believed them when Nancy had told them that Will and Jane were dead, sending fake condolences to the group inside the hospital and allowing Richie to use the hour before saying his goodbyes to his

friends.

Because in Henry's mind, Richie would *never* see them again. He would be taking him away to lock him back up the lab for good.

"It's gonna be okay." Vic said, patting Richie's shoulder and giving it a squeeze. "You're still in the first stage of Zirifran. It's the part where it heals abnormalities to the body."

"I don't think that includes gunshot wounds, Vic." Richie said, bouncing nervously.

"It healed your broken ribs and a lot of internal bleeding. It might do the same for a gunshot wound but... I wouldn't go getting yourself shot on purpose to test that theory. We don't really know *everything* about Zirifran yet. Okay, you have to tie my hands up now, Eddie. Remember –"

"I know." Eddie said looping a rope loosely in his hands. "Give you your gun back as we hand you over. Are you sure this is gonna work?"

"Yeah. It's gonna work. If we don't kill them, they'll kill everyone here and I'm not gonna let that happen. We have to do this. We do this and we're free."

"Right. I'm gonna go get Mike so we can get this over with." Eddie still seemed sceptical as he headed from the room, sparing them a quick glance over his shoulder.

"Hey Richie, can you go to my bag and get the syringe in the side pocket?"

Richie crossed the room wordlessly, unzipping the side pocket of Vic's bag and grabbing a capped syringe which contained a light red liquid tinted with a dark green. "Uh, Vic? What exactly is this stuff?"

"Liquid Zirifran. Lucille left it with me in case you needed a booster once I got you out of the lab but you recovered just fine without it. Listen to me Richie. I'm giving that to you but it's a last resort and there's only one of it. If something *does* go wrong, be absolutely sure before you use it on anyone. You've experienced this... change...

and... the quickest way to administer it into the body is through the chest... straight into the heart.”

“Why would you give this to me?”

“Because you don’t have to stick your tongue down Eddie’s throat for me to know you love him and if something happens to him... you have a way to help him. I know the chances of death are still there but...”

“There’s always the chance they’ll live.”

“Seventy percent chance of coming out of it alive.”

“That’s – wow – I thought it would be lower.”

“The closer they are to death, the lower the chances of coming out of it human. When we took you, the chances were thirty percent. If you have to use it... you can’t hesitate. The sooner you do it, the higher the chance he’ll survive it.”

“Why would you do this?”

“I was dragged away from someone I care about because of a horde... and the last thing I saw was them die. I won’t let someone else go through that if I can help it.”

“There’s no way I would inject him with this shit without his permission.”

Vic grimaced. “I used to think the same thing... and then Lucille got bitten by one of the patients in the lab and I just... grabbed the stuff from Doctor Maxwell’s hand and stabbed Lucille with the needle. In the heat of the moment... you don’t think. You just *do*.”

“Guys, it’s time to go.” Beverly said, leaning into the room. “Richie... are you sure that you still want to do this? You don’t have to. We can _”

Richie shoved the syringe into the pocket of his hoody. “I’m sure, Bev. You heard Vic. Henry won’t stop until he gets what he wants. What he wants, is me and Vic.”

"I'm just... concerned. Putting you in the line of fire like this..."

Richie offered her a smile. "I'll be okay Bev. I'll have Eddie, Mike, and Vic there with me."

"I won't let him get hurt." Vic assured her. "Let's get this over with."

Henry was leaning idly against the hood of his car, using a knife to pick out dirt from under his nails when the makeshift gate to the hospital opened and five people emerged. Steve hung back at the opened gate while Eddie walked behind Vic, his hands loosely on his wrists; one finger tied into a loose part of the rope's knot to undo it when he had to. Mike had a firm grip on Richie's arm, steering him up the street towards the car.

They were halfway there when Henry pushed up from the hood. "Vic! I missed you buddy! Lucille misses you too! She'll be so glad when we take you home."

"Of course they'd play the Lucille card." Eddie muttered. "You better not get any ideas."

"She told me not to go back and I won't." Vic said.

"That's close enough! Stop where you are assholes. Belch will come to you and you better hand Vic over." Henry called.

"Shit." Vic hissed as he stopped walking. "I was banking on being able to get close to Henry and Patrick."

"We can still do this, right?" Richie asked, glancing to Vic.

"Yeah. Yeah we can."

Belch pushed up from the hood of the car, tightening his grip on the rifle in his hand before he started to approach them. Henry walked around the side of the car and wrenched open the door, bending inside to grab something.

Once Belch was directly in front of Vic, Eddie pulled on the knot the release Vic from its binds, holding out his gun with the other hand.

“Vic.” Belch reached out, placing his hand to Vic’s shoulder and giving it a squeeze. “Lucille’s safe. She’s in Atlanta.”

Vic took the pistol from Eddie and held it tightly at his side. “She is?”

“Yeah. A doctor Tozier called and requested her transfer. Doctor Grey couldn’t say no without giving himself up but... she said she’s going to tell them in Atlanta what he’s been doing.”

Richie felt his throat tighten and Eddie reached over to grab his hand. “I thought you already knew he was alive? Didn’t Lucille –”

Richie squeezed at his hand. “I thought – I wasn’t sure if it was just something Lucille was saying for idle conversation to make sure no one picked up on what she was *really* trying to tell me.”

“Your dad got her out.” Vic breathed, his finger inching towards the trigger of the pistol. “Then I’m gonna return the favour to him and get you out of this town and to Atlanta.”

“Lucille had a message for you too.” Belch said. “*Atlanta almost has a cure.*”

“What’s taking you so long Belch?” Patrick called.

“You didn’t give me the binds for the patient!” Belch called over his shoulder.

“Two of you can handle it! Get him here and *we’ll* bind him.”

“Belch we have to end this so we can go. We *need* to go to Atlanta.” Vic said.

“I know.” Blech said, adjusting the rifle in his hands. He turned sharply, his back to Vic as a gunshot rang out across the street.

20. Chapter 20

Summary for the Chapter:

Pft, me writing an anticlimactic fight? It's more likely than you think.

Henry had ducked behind the car door the moment the shot had rang out and Patrick had managed to dive behind a nearby abandoned car, rendering both of them safe for now as a deadly silence stretched over the streets. Belch had missed his target, resulting in a bullet hole now residing in the window of the door that was shielding Henry.

A snarl rang out and Mike turned sharply, gun raised to fire at the zombie running towards them from the nearby alleyway. The zombie jerked and fell back from the shot, revealing another behind him that leapt towards them.

Richie threw himself at Eddie, tackling him to the ground and trapping the boy under him, tucking as much of him under his own body as he possibly could. Lifting his head slightly, he could see that Vic had Mike pinned to a nearby wall; awkwardly hunched over him to shield him from the jumper.

The zombie landed in a skid on the ground, claws scratching through the surface of the road before she stood to her full height, sniffing the air and letting out another snarl before changing her direction for the gate. A shot rang out from Nancy's sniper rifle and the zombie shot backwards, crashing into the ground with a thud.

"Fuck that was close." Richie breathed.

Eddie was gripping rightly at the front of Richie's hoody, releasing a breath he wasn't even aware that he'd been holding in. "How did you know that would work against that zombie?"

"Zombie instincts." Richie grimaced. *Devour*. "I just... knew."

"We got more coming." Belch hissed from his place a few feet away, ducked behind the front of an abandoned car. "Don't move; either of

you.”

Eddie’s fingers sank further into Richie’s hoody, his body curling more under him to make it easier for him to shield him. He couldn’t see anything beyond Richie who was instructing him to keep his attention focused on his face and nothing else, but he could hear the snarls of the zombies around them; their feet scraping against the floor as they stumbled along.

One of them bumped into Richie’s leg, paused, sniffed, and then continued on its way. Gunshots sounded, and the moment a bullet hit the hood of the car next to them, Richie was made aware that Henry was still alive too; taking the opportunity of the confusion from the horde to take them out.

“Belch I can’t lie here forever under fire.” Richie hissed in the larger man’s direction.

“The horde is heading for the gate, just hold on a little longer, okay?” Blech moved to his knees, firing in the direction of Henry and Patrick over the hood.

Across the street, Vic had one arm pointed in their direction, firing his pistol. “Why did they have to be *shamblers*? They’re taking too long to move!”

“We just have to be patient!” Belch snapped, ducking behind the hood again as Henry fired at him, the bullet hitting the metal and bouncing off it.

“That’s easy for you to say!” Richie snapped, moving one arm from its place to reach for the pistol in the back of his jeans.

He yanked the gun from its hiding place and brought his arm back to Eddie’s side as a zombie turned to face them. Suddenly cut off from the smell of a living person, the zombie was forced to shuffle along and follow the others.

The sound of metal rattling caught their attention and the next thing they could hear was gunfire, and lots of it. Richie looked up, and he could make out Beverly, Max, and Stan as they ran into the streets,

each armed with a variety of guns as they tried to take out the horde. Steve ran out behind them and slammed his bat into the head of one of the zombies, waving his arm towards Nancy who started to push the gate to close it.

Beverly twisted her shotgun around and slammed it into a zombie, knocking it back into the line of Stan's fire while she simultaneously tried to reload it. Max shouldered a zombie away from her; knocking it off its feet and giving Beverly the time she needed to reload.

"Why is there a horde here?" Beverly asked, twisting the shotgun back around and firing at another zombie.

"We have barricades set up to keep the zombies herded one street over." Max said, slamming her knife into the skull of a zombie that was too close for her comfort; nose wrinkling in disgust as she drew the knife back, splattering blood and brain matter onto her own face. "We send a team out to take care of them but with everything that happened lately –"

Beverly cut her off with a shotgun blast as a zombie jumped towards them. "Well, we'll just have to be that team today. Stan, how you doing?"

Stan groaned at the click that resounding when he pulled the trigger of his rifle. "Not good."

Steve was suddenly at his side, slamming his bat down into the head of a zombie. "Groups of two. One melee, one gun. You cover each other. That's how we take out a horde. That's how we survive this."

"What about those other assholes?" Beverly asked, nodding her head in the direction of Henry and Patrick.

"Leave them to Vic's group, they're closer. Our job is to take out the horde. Bill and Dustin have the others covered. Max, Beverly, you take everything on the right. We'll take the left."

Richie stumbled to his feet, pulling Eddie to his feet as he did. Yanking his hoody over his head, he carefully tugged it over Eddie, hoping that his own now warped scent clinging to it would be

enough to cover Eddie's from the zombies around them.

"Eds, listen to me, you have to head back for the gate, okay?" Richie said, pulling the hood up and tucking Eddie's hair under it. "The others are over there and you need to go help them."

"You think I'm just gonna leave you here?" Eddie demanded, glaring up at him. "Last time I left you for a second you could have died. I'm not leaving you again."

"I don't have time to argue with you about this, and I'm not giving you a –" Richie was cut off as something slammed into him.

Henry and Richie rolled across the ground until they were in the opening of the alleyway. Richie's head met the sidewalk with a sickening thud, sending a shock of pain through his system. The moment of disorientation slowly passed, and he could make out Henry sitting above him, legs either side of Richie and his hands clamped around his throat.

"You're not irreplaceable, patient fourteen. I'm sure your faggot friends would make fine replacements. Should we start with your boyfriend?" Henry hissed, pressing his thumbs into Richie's windpipe. Richie clawed at Henry's wrists in an attempt to free himself. "Give *up* already. You're not strong enough. You're not like the other two were. You have no powers... no ability. You don't have what it takes to take me down!"

Richie could see the darkness creeping into his vision, and for a brief moment, it wasn't Henry he could see sitting above him. It was himself; zombieified with blood dripping from his mouth and clouded dead white eyes.

No. I refuse to become that. I didn't fight the flu stage of Zirifran just to die.

A clanging thud sounded and Richie could finally breathe again, taking in deep breaths accompanied by coughs as he rolled onto his side. A hand grabbed at his arms and Richie blinked away the spots in his vision, looking up at the blurry form of Eddie who was helping him to stand, wielding a pipe in his other hand.

“Eh-Eds?”

“I told you. I’m not leaving you.” Eddie said, tightening his grip on the pipe. “Are you okay? He just jumped you out of nowhere.”

“Fuh-fine.” Richie winced, moving a hand to the back of his head, furrowing his brow at the lack of injury despite the blood on the pavement. “Right. The Zirifran. Here, give me that.”

Richie reached out for the pipe and Eddie surrendered it. He took a shaky step forward towards Henry who was slowly pushing himself up. The dizziness passed and Richie was walking on stronger legs towards his target; almost predatory like the Hunter zombies he’d seen.

They were skinnier than most zombies, but not in a starved sense. They moved with predator-like precision. They were built for speed.

And that’s what he was. Some hybrid of a human and Hunter zombie. The lab had fucked with his DNA. Turned him into something disgusting.

Richie swung the pipe out, catching Henry in face. Henry stumbled in mid-stand, crumpling to the ground. “You assholes hit me with a car.” Henry looked up, surprised by the sudden assault, and Richie smacked him with the pipe again. “You kidnapped me.” He punctuated it with another smack. “You completely fucked me up.” He brought the pipe down onto the top of Henry’s head; not even giving him a chance to even *glance* at him. “And now you’re threatening my friends? When I’m done with you there’s gonna be nothing left.”

Richie slammed the pipe down into Henry’s head again, but he didn’t stop there; not even when a large pool of blood formed onto the pavement underneath Henry’s head. It was like he *couldn’t* stop. Every fibre in he’s being was telling him to just carry on. To keep driving the pipe down until there was nothing left of Henry. Henry had now become an unrecognizable mess of blood, brain matter, broken skull fragments, and other fluids on the ground but Richie just *couldn’t* stop his assault no matter how much his brain screamed at him.

“Richie!” Eddie ran forward, his front slamming into Richie’s back and his arms sliding around his waist; fingers gripping at front of his hoody tightly. “Stop. He’s dead. He’s not coming back from that. He’s gone.”

Richie’s body heaved against his own, and as if someone had shocked him, he suddenly dropped the bloodied pipe to the ground with a clang. “Shit... I...”

Vic joined them, a concerned look on his face as he glanced from Richie to the remains of Henry’s body and back again. “Instincts. It’s like when a zombie bites you and then they can’t stop. It’s the same for us. Are you –”

“I’m okay.” Richie cut Vic off, taking in a deep breath. “Really, I am. I’m okay. It’s just... not easy to take in that I just went rabid zombie mode.”

“You’re okay now.” Eddie tightened his arms around Richie. “I’ve got you.”

“You’re the reason I stopped.”

“I know.”

“Where’s Patrick?”

“He’s gone.” Vic said. “He used the horde to get away but he’s on foot. He won’t make it back to the lab and if he does... he sure as hell won’t come back here.”

“So... now we go to Atlanta?”

“You’re sure that’s what you still want to do?”

Richie nodded quickly, his hands pressing against Eddie’s. “I don’t wanna be... *this*... anymore. I don’t even know what I am. I just... I want to be cured from whatever the Zirifran did to me. I want to be me again”

“We’ll leave in two days. I’ll get you there, and we’ll get you a cure. I promise.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Yeah so I decided NOT to hurt Eddie in the end, mostly because I have things planned for him in the sequel I have planned for this, so don't be discouraged by the fact this one is almost over. I have 3 stories planned!

NOW OPEN: I have eight fresh slots for untouchables in the sequel so drop a comment on who you want (you can as for two per person) and the characters with the most votes will be untouchables.

Aside from the lucky seven you can vote for Georgie, Vic, Belch Jane, Will, Steve, Nancy, Dustin, Lucas, and Max as they're going to be carried over to the next story and they will be more active than they were in this one since this story just serves as a beginning or a season one; however you want to look at it.

You can also request characters I haven't included in this one to show up since they'll be more on the road!

21. Chapter 21

Summary for the Chapter:

And finally, we reach the end. (Until I post the sequel at least!)

Since you guys have given me so much support (complete with some screaming in my tumblr inbox or tagged posts about not trusting me which was beautiful), I've given you all a little treat! Remember, the Sequel will be called 'No Sanctuary' and the first chapter will be posted either Wednesday or Thursday depending how fast I can get my other updates done!

Enjoy your final chapter for the first part of the zombie au, and remember you can still vote for unkillables for the next two days since I will be starting with a fresh slate. There are six slots to fill because lets face it, Eddie and Richie are forever unkillable in this series!

The hospital was a busy hum of activity as those heading for Atlanta packed their things into the trunks of the vehicles they were using for their travel. Bill handed a couple more bags over to Stan who shoved them into the trunk of the Mustang, slotting them easily into whatever spaces were left inside.

Across the parking lot, Beverly was tossing a few bags into the back of the Station Wagon while Vic and Belch packed some things into the bed of truck; mostly extra guns and ammunition they would need on the road.

"This is gonna be a long trip." Eddie propped himself against the wall next to Richie, watching as Dustin and Lucas packed some bags into the back of the mini-van; both of them laughing and joking about something.

"Not my first long trip. I made it from Nouvelle to Derry with Stan and his broken ankle remember." Richie swigged at his water, his

fingers gripping the bottle a little tighter than what was necessary and denting the plastic slightly. “Hey Eds... when we get to Atlanta... can you... I mean... I don’t wanna –”

Eddie reached out and took Richie’s hand, threading their fingers together and running his thumb against the back of his hand. “I won’t leave you alone in that place Richie. I promise. The last time you were alone in a place like that you became infected, and I’m gonna make sure they don’t make it worse somehow. I’ll be there with you the whole time, even if they try to stop me.”

Richie smiled, bringing Eddie’s hand to his mouth and kissing at his knuckles lightly. “Thanks Eds. Are you sure that you’re not just in it for the real kiss after I’m cured though?”

“Oh yeah, I’m going through all this for *one* kiss from you.” Eddie rolled his eyes, smiling up at him.

“Who said it would just be the one?” Richie asked, now pressing light kisses to the back of Eddie’s hand. “I don’t think I’m gonna be able to stop once I start and you’re gonna end up with a hundred all at once. I hate being a carrier.”

“You won’t be one for long.” Eddie assured, leaning up to press a kiss to Richie’s nose. “You heard what Belch said to Vic the other day. Atlanta almost has a cure. They might have one by the time we get there; ready to administer into you.”

“And you... and everyone else. No more living in fear of those things.”

“Yeah... it sounds like a pipe dream.”

“I believe Belch about the cure. He doesn’t have a reason to lie to us or Vic since he didn’t wanna be in that lab either. And if Lucille is there with them... they’re *definitely* gonna be closer to a cure than they already were. She understands Zirifran and how it works better than most people. Maybe Zirifran is the missing piece to the cure. Zirifran caused the outbreak a year ago and maybe... just maybe... Zirifran can end it.”

“There’s only one way to find out, right?”

“Yeah, and that’s by going to Atlanta.” Richie released Eddie hand to cap his water bottle, shoving it into the pocket of his hoody. Fishing out the keys for the Mustang from his jeans, he dropped them carefully into Eddie’s hand. “Bill gave them back to me earlier but I don’t trust myself to drive at the moment. Everything is still...”

“I get it.” Eddie looped his finger into the keychain and curled his hand around the keys; leaning up once again to peck at Richie’s cheek. “I’ve got you.”

“I hate this.”

“It’s temporary.”

“I know it’s just... frustrating.” Richie slung his arm around Eddie’s shoulders, drawing him into his side as he pushed from the wall; the two of them heading for the Mustang as Stan slammed the trunk down.

“Here.” Stan tossed a bottle of Zirifran pills to Richie. “Vic said you need to keep taking those until you stop wanting to tear everyone apart.”

Eddie was the one to catch the tub of pills, pushing them into Richie’s pocket. “Don’t say it like that. Richie’s not –”

“He’s right Eds. That’s exactly what the feeling is. You guys smell so damn alive and I just want to pounce on you and rip you open.” Richie ruffled at Eddie’s hair with a grin. “It’s getting easier every day though. Where’s Bill?”

Stan removed the sniper from his back, opening one the Mustang’s back doors and propping it just inside. “He’s inside saying goodbye to his mom. Mike’s doing the same with his parents. They’re staying behind because it’s safer here and... they can take care of these people.”

“Yeah, you’re right. They can.”

“Hey Rich, you know we’re not gonna leave you, right? When we get

to Atlanta, I mean. We're gonna make sure nothing bad happens to you or the others."

Richie snorted and ruffled Eddie's hair again. "I got my guard human person right here, Staniel. When we get there you should take a long well-deserved rest because this trip isn't going to be easy for any of us. I know it doesn't *look* far to travel but..."

"I know. There are a lot of zombies still out there. There's nothing out there that we haven't faced before, though. We've been dealing with this new world for a year. What's a few more days or weeks?"

"A minor annoyance."

By midday, the group leaving the hospital for Atlanta was fully packed and ready to go. Georgie had managed to squeeze himself into the back of the Mustang with Bill and Stan; an easy task now that Stan didn't have to lie across the back seats because of a broken ankle.

As they finally drove out of the hospital parking lot, the gates closing behind them, Eddie reached over to thread his fingers through Richie's, bringing his hand over to the gearstick with his own.

"You're gonna be okay. I'm gonna make sure of it, Rich."

From his peripheral vision Eddie could see Richie's mouth twitch into a smile, though his eyes were fixed on the back of the mini-van in front of them which contained Steve, Nancy, Jane and Dustin. For a brief moment, as they turned a corner and the sun hit the windshield, Eddie could see the slight glow of the white ring around Richie's pupil.

The ring itself was thicker now, but still not painfully noticeable unless you were sitting or standing close to him. Richie seemed to notice the glow of the ring too, because he reached for the mirror in front of him with his free hand and pushed the visor up quickly so it smacked into the roof with a *snap*.

Eddie sighed, giving his hand a squeeze. "It's not that bad, you know. Sure, it's a little weird, but not bad."

Richie's jaw clenched, his hand dropping from the visor. "I don't like them. They're zombie eyes. They eyes of the things that are relentlessly hunting us and trying to kill us."

Eddie gave his hand another squeeze but didn't push it. Richie wasn't a zombie. He wasn't a killer. Richie wouldn't hurt any of them even though the urges were there. He was fighting them, and Eddie knew he always would.

In the back of the Mustang, Georgie was already asleep, his head propped against Bill's shoulder. The silence was oddly comforting, and Eddie found himself starting to enjoy it after the last few weeks. It was peaceful and relaxing; allowing them to finally breathe.

*"Hey guys, don't forget. If you need to stop for **anything** just honk. We don't need anyone getting left behind."* Mike's voice rang out over the radio.

Richie raised the radio to his mouth. "Got it, Mike. We stick together now. No more splitting up for anything. If something drags me into an alleyway by my shoelace I expect you fuckers to come running."

"Absolutely not." Beverly joked, her voice ringing clear through the car. *"We give your boyfriend a chance first. If he does come back in two minutes we come after the both of you."*

"Come on Bev, you know that shit ain't a thing." Mike said with a chuckle, and Eddie released Richie's hand to take the radio and bring it to his own mouth.

"Oh it's definitely a thing, Mike. Sorry you guys, the zombie man in the Mustang is all mine. Get your own."

It was the first time Richie laughed about his condition, and Eddie grinned at him.

"I fucking knew it!" Beverly's voice reached them from the radio. *"I called this shit the second we got back to the farm and Eddie was staring at him. This is now becoming my motivation to get Richie a cure. I want them to seal their whole future with a kiss!"*

"Bev!"

“Don’t you ‘Bev!’ me Mike! I’m full supportive of team Reddie.”

“Did you just give u a fucking *ship name*?” Eddie asked, radio poised by his mouth.

“Damn right I did.”

“I don’t know how I feel about this.” Richie said, shaking his head in slight amusement. “So you were staring at me huh?”

“Shut up Richie!” Eddie snapped, tossing the radio back into Richie’s lap and linking their hands again. “Don’t ruin this.”

Richie smiled and fell silent, closing his eyes as he tilted his head back against his seat with a soft thump. The fear of being in another lab had gone away for now. Knowing that Eddie would be there was enough for him. Eddie wouldn’t let anything happen to him in that place. Even the lingering voice of his inner infected that constantly wanted him to tear into everyone around him was quiet now; giving Richie some peace and quiet.

It wouldn’t last.

But it was enough for now.

Doctor Wentworth Tozier held his arm out for Lucille, watching her carefully as she injected a green serum into his arm. With the syringe empty, she placed it to one side, holding a gloved hand over his arm. Jessica stared at the screen of the computer in front of her, monitoring the shift in his vitals carefully for five straight minutes.

“Nothing is changing. He’s still infected.” Jessica heaved a sigh, slowly pushing herself up. “If we don’t find a cure –”

“We’re *close* Jessica.” Wentworth stood, flexing his arm carefully. “This is the closest that we’ve ever been.”

“Yes, and with each passing day, you get worse. You’re closer to infected than you are to human.” Jessica snapped, grabbing her coffee mug to sip at her drink. “What we need is...”

The realisation hit Lucille. Carriers weren’t *supposed* to have white

rings in their eyes. Neither she nor Jessica had them.

“What you need a bio-weapon like what Doctor Grey was constructing.”

“Yes, but you said Doctor Grey destroyed –”

“All but eight of them, and five of them should be coming here providing that Belch got to them and told them I was here. Doctor Tozier, I should have told you sooner. Doctor Maxwell... she used Zirifran H on your son.”

Jessica dropped her mug onto the floor. “Zirifran *H*? She used that? That was a *cure* trial that went wrong. How could she –”

“I don’t know! I wasn’t there! I found him one day vomiting that sludge and Vic said she’d used Zirifran on him. I noticed later on that the vial she’d used said Zirifran H. I gave Vic a normal Zirifran in case Richie slipped. It should outweigh the H gene.”

“Lucille.” Wentworth leaned on the counter between them carefully, his eyes never leaving her. “Are you telling me that Doctor Maxwell has infected my *son* with the DNA of a *Hunter*?”

“Yes, and I haven’t seen him since I helped him to escape the laboratory in Hawkings so I have no idea if he’s alive or turned into one of them.”

Wentworth nodded and turned to leave the room, signalling for Lucille to follow him. Lucille did so silently, following him down numerous hallways.

“The person you sent to me before has been recovering well.” Wentworth said, leading Lucille to one of the secure rooms towards the back of the complex. “It’s a long road to their recovery. They barely know their own name, and I sure as hell don’t know it. I’m surprised that you were able to get them out.”

“It wasn’t... easy. I had to find a body double for them to convince the lab they were dead.”

Wentworth pulled out a keycard, sliding it into a panel. The doors

opened with a low buzz and allowed the two of them to step into the secure bedroom; closing the moment they were inside.

“How are you doing today?”

A nineteen year old boy sat with their back towards them, not even bothering to look up from the sheet of paper they were drawing on. Lucille glanced to Wentworth who nodded; signalling that it was okay for her to approach them.

Lucille did, circling them carefully to crouch in front of them. “Do you remember me?”

The boy didn’t look up, a soft hum coming from the back of their throat. “Luh...ciel. You... got... me... out.”

“That’s right. I’m sorry they scrambled your brain so much before I could help you. Do you know the name of the Doctor who did this to you?”

The boy nodded. “Grey... Maxwell...”

“What about the ones who have been taking care of you?”

“Toe-zee-uhr. Juh-Jessica...”

“That’s good. You’re doing well sweetie. What about you though? Do you remember your own name yet? Or your friends?”

The boy looked up, dark eyes with a thick white ring staring up at her. “Muh... my name... is...” She watched his brow furrow for a moment as he tried to remember. “My-chel? M...Mike?”

“That’s right.” Lucille smiled, reaching out and ruffling his hair. “You’re Mike Wheeler, and you’re our little secret from the Hawkings lab.”